

contrast to the mood of most establishments of its ilk, this inn was nearly somber. In murky corners, men spoke in hushed tones, discussing things best not overheard by the uninvolved. A grunt of agreement to a whispered proposal or a bitter laugh from a woman of negotiable virtue were the only sounds to intrude upon the silence. The majority of the denizens of the inn called the Sleeping Dockman were closely watching the game.

The game was pokiir, common to the Empire of Great Kesh to the south and now replacing lin-lan and pashawa as the gambler's choice in the inns and taverns of the Western Realm of the Kingdom. One player held his five cards before him, his eyes narrowed in concentration. An off-duty soldier, he kept alert for any sign of trouble in the room, and trouble was rapidly approaching. He made a display of studying his cards, while discreetly inspecting the five men who played at the table with him.

The first two on his left were rough men. Both were sunburned and the hands holding their cards were heavily callused; faded linen shirts and cotton trousers hung loosely on lank but muscular frames. Neither wore boots or even sandals, barefoot despite the cool night air, a certain sign they were sailors waiting for a new berth. Usually such men quickly lost their pay and were bound again for sea, but from the way they had bet all night, the soldier was certain they were working for the man who sat to the soldier's right.

new cut-away design, a rather garish yellow, with white and silver brocade at the wrists and collar. He was a typical dandy. And from the look of the Rodezian slamanca hanging from the loose baldric across his shoulder, a dangerous man. It was a sword only used by a master or someone seeking a quick death—in the hands of an expert it was a fearsome weapon; in the hands of the inexperienced it was suicide.

The man had probably lost large sums of money before and now sought to recoup his previous losses by cheating at cards. One or the other of the sailors would win an occasional hand, but the soldier was certain this was planned to keep suspicion from falling upon the young dandy. The soldier sighed, as if troubled by what choice to make. The other two players waited patiently for him to make his play.

They were twin brothers, tall—two inches over six feet he judged—and fit in appearance. Both came to the table armed with rapiers, again the choice of experts or fools. Since Prince Arutha had come to the throne of Krondor twenty years before, rapiers had become the choice of men who wore weapons as a consideration of fashion rather than survival. But these two didn't look the type to sport weapons as decorative baubles. They were dressed as common mercenaries, just in from caravan duty from the look of them. Dust still clung to their tunic and leather vest, while their red-brown hair was lightly matted. Both needed a shave. Yet while their clothing was

The brothers had commenced the game with glee, ordering tankard after tankard of ale, letting losses delight them as much as wins, but now that the stakes of the game were rising, they had become somber. They glanced at each other from time to time, and the soldier was certain they shared silent communication the way twins often did.

The soldier shook his head. "Not me." He threw down his cards, one of them flipping completely over for an instant before it came to rest upon the table. "I've got duty in an hour; I'd best be back to the barracks."

What he really knew was that trouble was imminent and if he were still around when it arrived, he'd never make muster. And the duty sergeant was a man not given to receiving excuses kindly.

Now the dandy's eyes turned to the first of the two brothers. "Play?"

As the soldier reached the door of the inn, he took note of two men standing quietly in the corner. They stood in great cloaks, faces obscured slightly by the shadows of their hoods, despite the night being warm. Both made a show of quietly watching the game, but they were taking in every detail of the inn. They also looked familiar to the soldier, but he couldn't place them. And there was something about the way they stood, as if ready to leap to action, that reaffirmed the soldier's determination to reach the city barracks early. He opened the door to the inn and stepped through, closing it behind.

staying or folding?"

"Well," answered the young man, "this is something of a poser." He looked at his brother. "Eriand, I would have sworn an oath to Astalon the Judge that I saw a Blue Lady flip when that soldier tossed in his hand."

"Why," answered his twin with a twisted smile, "does that pose a problem, Borric?"

"Because I also have a Blue Lady in my hand."

Men began to back away from the table as the tone of conversation shifted. Discussion of what cards one held was not the norm. "I still see no problem," observed Eriand, "as there are two Blue Ladies in the deck."

With a malicious grin, Borric said, "But you see, our friend over here," he indicated the dandy, "also has a Blue Lady tucked just not quite far enough back in his sleeve."

Instantly the room erupted into motion as men put as much distance as possible between the combatants and themselves. Borric leaped from his seat, gripping the edge of the table and overturning it, forcing the dandy and his two henchmen back. Eriand had his rapier and a long dirk out as the dandy drew his slamanca. .

One of the two sailors lost his footing and fell forward. As he tried to rise, he found his chin met by the toe of Borric's boot. He collapsed into a heap at the young mercenary's feet. The dandy leaped forward, executing

Borric disposed of the second sailor with little trouble and turned to discover Eriand in a close struggle with the dandy. "Eriand! Could you use a hand?"

Eriand shouted, "I think not. Besides, you always say I need the practice."

"True," answered his brother with a grin. "But don't let him kill you. I'd have to avenge you."

The dandy tried a combination attack, a high, low, then high series of chops, and Eriand was forced to back away. In the night the sound of whistles could be heard.

"Eriand," said Borric.

The hard-pressed younger twin said, "What?" as he dodged another masterfully executed combination attack.

"The watch is coming. You'd better kill him quickly."

"I'm trying," said Eriand, "but this fellow isn't being very cooperative." As he spoke, his boot heel struck a pool of spilled ale and he lost his footing. Suddenly he was falling backward, his defense gone.

Borric was moving as the dandy lunged at his brother. Eriand twisted upon the floor, but the dandy's sword struck his side. Hot pain erupted along his ribs. And at the same instant the man had opened his left side to a counter thrust. Sitting upon the floor, Eriand thrust upward with his rapier,

"Or he you. And I'd not want to face Father had I let that happen. Besides, you really wouldn't have killed him; you just don't have the instinct. You'd have tried to disarm him or something equally noble," Borric observed, catching his breath in a gasp, ". . . and stupid. Now, let's see about getting out of here."

Eriand gripped his wounded side as they headed toward the door. Several town toughs, seeing blood upon Eriand's side, moved to block the twin's exit. Borric and Eriand both leveled their sword points at the band of men. Borric said, "Keep your guard up a moment," picked up a chair, and threw it through the large bay window facing the boulevard. Glass and leading showered the street, and before the tinkle of shards upon stone had stopped, both brothers were leaping through what remained of the window. Eriand stumbled and Borric had to grip his arm to keep him from falling.

As they straightened, they took in the fact that they were looking at horses. Two of the more bold thugs jumped through the window after the twins, and Borric smashed one in the side of the head with his sword hilt, while the other man pulled up short as three crossbows were leveled at him. Arrayed before the door was the small company of ten burly and heavily armed town watchmen commonly known as the Riot Squad. But what had the half-dozen denizens of the Sleeping Dockman standing in

mercenaries.

"Ah . . . good evening, my lord," said Borric, a smile slowly spreading across his face. The leader of the Riot Squad, seeing no one else in sight, moved to take custody of the two young men.

The leader of the Royal Guard waved him off. "This doesn't concern you, Watchman. You and your men may go." The watch commander bowed slightly and led his men back to their barracks in the heart of the Poor Quarter.

Eriand winced a bit as he said, "Baron Locklear, what a pleasure."

Baron Locklear, Knight-Marshal of Krondor, smiled an unamused smile. "I'm certain." Despite his rank, he looked barely a year or two older than the boys, though he was nearly sixteen years their senior. He had curly blond hair and large blue eyes, which were presently narrowed as he watched the twins in obvious disapproval.

Borric said, "And I expect that means that Baron James—"

Locklear pointed. "Is standing behind you."

Both brothers turned to see the man in the great cloak framed in the doorway. He threw back his hood to reveal a face still somewhat youthful despite his thirty-seven years of age, his curly brown hair slightly dusted with grey. It was a face the brothers knew as well as any, for he had been one of their teachers since boyhood, and more, one of their closest friends.

Locklear and I comb the entire city for two days seeking you out." He studied the two young men, "But I trust you'll remember all those little details when your father has words with you after court tomorrow."

Two horses were brought forward and a soldier deferentially held out the reins to each brother. Seeing the blood along Eriand's side, a Lieutenant of the Guard moved his horse nearby and said in mock sympathy, "Does His Highness require help?"

Eriand negotiated the stirrup and heaved himself into the saddle without aid. In irritated tones, he answered, "Only when I see Father, Cousin Willy, and I don't think you can do much for me then."

Lieutenant William nodded and in unsympathetic tones, he whispered, "He did say come home at once, Eriand."

Eriand nodded in resignation. "We just wanted to relax for a day or two before—"

William couldn't resist laughing at his cousins' predicament. He had often seen them bring disaster down upon themselves and he never could understand their appetite for such punishment. He said, "Maybe you could run for the border. I could get very stupid following you."

Eriand shook his head. "I think I'll wish I had taken your offer, after tomorrow morning's court."

the business of the court being conducted before him. A slender man in his youth, he had not gained the bulk commonly associated with middle age, but rather had become harder, more angular in features, losing what little softening effects youth had given his lanky appearance. His hair was still dark, though enough grey had come with the twenty years of ruling Krondor and the West to speckle it. His reflexes had slowed only slightly over the years, and he was still counted one of the finest swordsmen in the Kingdom, though he rarely had reason to exercise his skill with the rapier. His dark brown eyes were narrowed in concentration, a gaze that seemed to miss nothing, in the opinion of many who served the Prince. Thoughtful, even brooding at times, Arutha was a brilliant military leader. He had rightfully won his reputation during the nine years of the Riftwar—which had ended the year before the twins' birth—after taking command of the garrison at Crydee, his family's castle, when only a few months older than his sons were now.

He was counted a hard but fair ruler, quick to dispense justice when the crime warranted, though often given to acts of leniency at the request of his wife, the Princess Anita. And that relationship more than anything typified the administration of the Western Realm: hard, logical, evenhanded justice, tempered with mercy. While few openly sang Arutha's praises, he was well respected and honored, and his wife was beloved by her subjects.

The other members of the royal family were not normally required at morning court, but since the twins had returned from their service upon the border at Highcastle, it had become a family gathering.

Princess Elena stood at her mother's side. She looked a fair compromise between her parents, having red-brown hair and fair skin from her mother but her father's dark and intelligent eyes. Those who knew the royal family well often observed that if Borric and Eriand resembled their uncle, the King, then Elena resembled her aunt, the Baroness Carline of Salador. And Arutha had observed on more than one occasion she had Carline's renowned temper.

Prince Nicholas, Arutha and Anita's youngest child, had avoided the need to stand next to his sister, by hiding from his father's sight. He stood behind his mother's throne, beyond his father's gaze", on the first step off the dais. The door to the royal apartments was hidden from the eyes of those in the hall, down three steps, where, in years past, all four children had played the game of huddling on the first step, listening to their father conduct court, enjoying the delicious feeling of eavesdropping. Nicky waited for the arrival of his two brothers.

Anita glanced about with that sudden sense mothers have that one of their children is somewhere he shouldn't be. She spied Nicholas waiting down by the door, and motioned him to stand close. Nicky had idolized

refused to show the boy at the Presentation, the holiday in honor of a royal child's first public appearance, a tradition that may have died with Nicholas's birth.

Nicky turned when he heard the door open, and Erland peered through. The youngest Prince grinned at his brothers as they gingerly slipped through the door. Nicky scrambled down the three steps with his canted gate to intercept them, and gave each a hug. Eriand visibly winced and Borric bestowed an absent pat on the shoulder.

Nicky followed the twins as they slowly mounted the stairs behind the thrones, coming to stand behind their sister. She glanced over her shoulder long enough to stick out her tongue and cross her eyes, causing all three brothers to force themselves not to laugh. They knew no one else in court could see her fleeting pantomime. The twins had a long history of tormenting their little sister, who gave back as good as she got. She would think nothing of embarrassing them in the King's own court.

Arutha, sensing some exchange between his children, glanced over and gifted his four offspring with a quick frown, enough to silence any potential mirth. His gaze lingered on his elder sons and showed his anger in full measure, though only those close to him would recognize it as such. Then his attention was back upon the matter before the court. A minor noble was being advanced into a new office, and while the four royal children might

almost white in color, but he still had the alert eyes of one whose mind had lost none of its edge and a ready smile for the royal children. A commoner by birth, Gardan had risen on his ability, and despite an often expressed desire to retire and return to his home in Far Crydee, he had remained in Arutha's service, first as Sergeant in the garrison at Crydee, then Captain of the Prince's Royal Household, then Knight-Marshal of Krondor. When the previous Duke of Krondor, Lord Volney, had died unexpectedly after seven years' loyal service in his office, Arutha had awarded the office to Cardan. Despite the old soldier's protestations of not being suited to the nobility, he had proven an able administrator as well as a gifted soldier.

Cardan finished intoning the man's new rank and privileges and Arutha preferred a terribly oversized parchment with ribbons and seals embossed upon it.

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trivia made him a natural for the post. His love of detail manifested itself in the exquisite stitching of his cloak of office and the pointed chin beard he spent hours in trimming. In pompous tones, he spoke: "If it pleases Your Highness, His Excellency, Lord Torum Sie, Ambassador from the Royal court of Great Kesh."

The Ambassador, who had been standing off to one side, conferring with his advisors, approached the dais and bowed. By his attire, it was clear he was of the true Keshian people, for his head was shaved. His scarlet coat was cut away, revealing a pair of yellow pantaloons and white slippers. His chest was bare in the Keshian fashion, a large golden torque of office decorating his neck. Each item of clothing was delicately finished in almost imperceptible needlework, with tiny jewels and pearls decorating each seam. The effect was as if he was bathed in shimmering sparkles as he moved. He was easily the most splendid figure in court.

"Highness," he said, his speech tinged by a slight

sent by my mistress. The seventy-fifth anniversary of Her Magnificent's birth is an event of unsurpassed joy to the Empire. We will host a Jubilee that will be celebrated for two months. Will Your Highnesses be joining us?"

Already the King had sent his apologies, as had the ruler of every neighboring sovereignty from Queg to the Eastern Kingdoms. While there had been peace between the Empire and her neighbors for an unusu-

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ally long time—eleven years since the last major border clash—no ruler was foolish enough to come within the borders of the most feared nation upon Midkemia. Those rejections were considered proper. The invitation to the Prince and Princess of Krondor was another matter.

Arutha looked at his wife, and then the Ambassador.
"We regret that the press of official duty prevents us from undertaking so long a journey. Your Excellency."

The Ambassador's expression didn't change, but a slight hardening around the eyes indicated the Keshian considered the rejection close to an insult. "That is regrettable, Highness. My mistress did so consider your presence vital—should I say a gesture of friendship and goodwill."

The odd comment was not lost upon Arutha. He nodded. "Still, we would consider ourselves remiss in our friendship and goodwill to our neighbors in the south if we did not send one who could represent the Royal House of Isles." The Ambassador's eyes at once fixed upon the twins. "Prince Borric, Heir Presumptive to the Throne of Isles, shall be our representative at the Empress's Jubilee, my lord." Borric, suddenly the focus of scrutiny, found himself standing more erect, and felt

the Princes a moment in appreciation. "A fitting gesture of respect and friendship, Highness. My mistress will be pleased."

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Arutha's gaze swept the room, and for an instant fixed upon a man at the rear of the room, then continued on. As the Keshian Ambassador withdrew, Arutha rose from his throne and said, "We have much business before us this day; court will resume tomorrow at the tenth hour of the watch." He offered his hand to his wife, who took it as she stood. Escorting the Princess from the dais, he whispered to Borric, "You and your brother: in my chambers in five minutes." All four royal children bowed formally as their father and mother passed, then fell into procession behind them.

Borric glanced at Eriand and found his own curiosity mirrored in the face of his twin. The twins waited until they -were out of the hall and Eriand turned and

Eriand put his arm around his brother's neck and whispered in mock conspiracy, "It has come to my attention that two of the Prince's squires were caught brawling a month ago, and the reason seems to be which would escort our sister to the Festival of Banapis."

Elena fixed both brothers with a narrow gaze. "I had nothing to do with those idiots brawling." Then she brightened. "Besides, I spent the day with Baron Lowery's son, Thorn."

Both brothers laughed. "Which is also what we heard," said Borric. "Your reputation is reaching even to the Border Barons, little sister! And you not yet sixteen!"

Elena hiked up her skirts and swept past her brothers. "Well, I'm almost the age Mother was when she first met Father, and speaking of Father, if you don't get to

Borric made a show of glancing around, above Nicky's head. "What do you mean? I see nothing."

Nicky's expression turned to one of distress. "Borric!" he said, almost whining.

Borric glanced down. "Why, it's . . ." He turned to his brother. "What is it?"

Eriand slowly walked around Nicky. "I'm not sure. It's too small to be a goblin, yet too big to be a monkey—save perhaps a very tall monkey."

"Not broad enough in the shoulders to be a dwarf, and too finely tailored to be a beggar boy—"

Nicky's face clouded over. Tears began to form in his eyes. "You promised!" he said, his voice catching in his throat. He looked up at his brothers as they stood grinning down at him, then with tears upon his cheeks he

anymore." He heaved a sigh. "Another round of lectures. He's sure to run to Mother and she'll speak to Father and ..."

Borric winced. "And we'll get another round of lectures."

Then as one they said, "Father!" and hurried toward Arutha's private quarters. The guard stationed at the door, seeing the approaching brothers, opened the doors for them.

Once inside, the twins found their father seated in his favorite chair, an old thing of wood and leather, but which he preferred to any of the dozen others in the large conference hall. Standing slightly to his left were Barons James and Locklear. Arutha said, "Come in, you two."

The twins came to stand before their father, Eriand moving with a slight awkwardness, as his injured side

should have parried in six. The fellow got inside his guard."

Arutha's voice was cold. "Brawling again.-1 should have expected it, as Baron James obviously did." To James he said, "Anyone killed?"

James said, "No, but it was a bit close with the son of one of the city's more influential shippers."

Arutha's anger surfaced as he slowly rose from his chair. A man able to hold emotions in check, the sight of such a display was rare, and for those who knew him well, unwelcome. He came to stand before the twins and for a moment appeared on the verge of striking them. He stared into the eyes of each. He bit off each word as he sought to regain control. "What can you two possibly have been thinking of?"

Eriand said, "It was self-defense, Father. The man was trying to skewer me."

Arutha walked around them, as if inspecting horses or reviewing his guard. Both boys endured the close perusal, knowing their father's mood brooked no insolence.

At last he threw up his hands in a gesture of resignation and said, "These aren't my sons." He walked past the twins to stand next to the two Barons. "They've got to be ^Lyam's," he said, invoking the King's name.

Arutha's brother had been known for his temper and brawling as a youth. "Somehow Anita married me, but bore the King's ruffian brats." James could only nod in agreement. "It must be some divine plan I don't understand."

Returning his attention to his boys, he said, "If your grandfather still lived, he'd have you over a barrel, a

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leather strap in his hand, no matter your size or age.

in a near shout, he exclaimed, "You could have been killed!"

Borric began to quip, "Only if that parry—"

"Enough!" cried Arutha, his temper frayed beyond his ability to control it. He gripped Borric's tunic and pulled his son forward, off-balance. "You will not end this with a joke and smile! You have defied me for the last time." He punctuated this with a shove that sent Borric half-stumbling into his brother. Arutha's manner showed he had no patience for the flippancies from his son he usually ignored. "I didn't call you back because the court missed your peculiar sort of chaos. I think that another year or two on the border might have settled you down a bit, but I have no alternative. You have princely duties and you are needed now!"

Borric and Eriand exchanged glances. Arutha's moods were old business to them, and they had endured his anger—which was usually justified—before,

the business of dealing in private with the Keshian Ambassador this afternoon. Baron James will continue this conversation on my behalf!" At the door, he paused, and said to James, "Whatever you need do, do! But I want these miscreants impressed with the gravity of things when I speak to them this afternoon." He closed the door without waiting for a response.

James and Locklear moved to either side of the young

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Princes, and James said, "If Your Highnesses would be so kind as to follow us."

Borric and Eriand both glanced at their life-long tutors and "uncles" and then at each other. Both had an inkling of what was to come. Their father had never laid strap nor hand upon any of his children, to the profound relief of his wife, but that still didn't prevent regular bouts of "fighting practice," when the boys were un-

Baron James led the procession down the hall. At the door to the gymnasium, William again moved to open the door, for while he was second cousin to the twins, he was still merely a soldier in the company of nobles. Borric entered the room first, followed by Eriand and James, with Locklear and William behind.

Inside the room, Borric nimbly turned and walked backwards, his hands raised in a boxers pose, as he said, "We're a lot older and bigger, now, Uncle Jimmy. And you're not going to sucker punch me behind the ear like you did last time."

Eriand leaned to the left, clutching his side in exaggeration and suddenly developed a limp. "And faster, too. Uncle Locky." Without warning, he threw an elbow at Locklear's head. The Baron, a seasoned soldier of almost twenty years, dodged aside, allowing Eriand to overbalance. He then turned him in a circle by hauling on one arm, and pushed him into the center of the

pleasure of seeing how far you've come in the last two

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years." He hiked his thumb behind him, indicating a far corner. "Personally, that is."

Two soldiers, stripped to breeches only, stood in the corner. Each had massive arms crossed over impressively muscled chests. Baron James waved for them to approach. As they did, the boys glanced at one another.

The two men moved with the fluid motion of a thoroughbred war horse, supple, but with power waiting. Each looked as if he was carved from stone, and Borric whispered, "They're not human!" Eriand grinned, for both men had large jaws, suggesting the protruding mandible of mountain trolls.

"These gentlemen are from your Uncle Lyam's garrison," said Locklear. "We had a demonstration of the

Locklear injected, "He's champion of all men under two hundred pounds—ah, Eriand should be your student, Obregon; his side is injured. Be gentle with him."

"—and the other," continued Jimmy, "is Sergeant Palmer, from Bas-Tyra."

Borric's eyes narrowed as he studied the approaching soldier. "Let me guess: he's the champion of all men over two hundred pounds."

"Yes," said Baron James, with an evil smile.

Instantly, Borric's field of vision was filled by an oncoming fist. He quickly tried to move away from it, but abruptly discovered another had found the side of his head. Then he was considering who painted the frescos on the ceiling of the room his father had converted to a gymnasium. He really should ask someone.

Shaking his head as he slowly sat up, he could hear

tightly as he brought his own right hand hard up into Borric's stomach. Lieutenant William visibly winced as Borric's breath exploded from his lungs and his eyes crossed as he sank to the floor once more. Eriand began warily moving away from the other fist-boxer, who now was stalking him across the floor.

"If it has escaped your notice, your uncle the King has sired only daughters since young Prince Randolph died."

Borne waved off the offered hand of Sergeant Palmer and said, "Thanks. I'll get up by myself." As he came to one knee, he said, "I hardly dwell on the fact of our cousin's death, but I'm aware of it." Then as he started to stand, he drove a vicious blow into Sergeant Palmer's stomach.

The older, harder fighter stood rock steady, forced himself to take a breath, then smiled in appreciation

Eriand attempted to keep distance between himself and the approaching Sergeant Obregon. Suddenly, the young man was not backing up, but striking out with a flurry of blows. The Sergeant, rather than back away, raised his arms before his face and let the younger man strike his arms and shoulders. "Our uncle's lack of an heir is a fact not unknown to us, Uncle Jimmy," observed Eriand as his own arms began to tire while he futilely pounded upon the muscular sergeant. Abruptly, the Sergeant stepped inside Eriand's reach, and drove another blow into the youngster's side. Eriand's face drained of color and his eyes crossed, then unfocused.

Seeing the reaction. Sergeant Obregon said, "Pardon, Highness, I'd meant to strike the uninjured side."

Eriand's voice was a bare whisper as he gasped, "How very kind of you."

Borric shook his head to clear his thoughts, then quickly rolled backwards and came to his feet, ready to

Eriand's voice returned in a strangled gasp. "The Prince of Krondor is always Royal Heir."

"And your father is Prince of Krondor," interjected Locklear.

With a clever feint with his left, Borric drove his right into the jaw of Sergeant Palmer and momentarily staggered the older man. Another blow to the body and the boxer was retreating. Borric grew confident and stepped in to deliver a finishing blow, and abruptly the world turned upside down.

Borric's vision turned yellow then red for a long while, and while he hung in space, the floor came up to strike him in the back of the head. Then blackness crowded in at the edge of his vision and he saw a ring of faces looking down a deep well at him. They seemed friendly faces, and he thought he might know who they were, but he didn't feel any need to worry on it, as he

ter.

Baron James was upon one knee and helped the Prince sit upright. "Are you still with me?"

Borric shook his head and his eyes focused. "I think so," he managed to gasp.

"Good. For if your father is still Heir to the throne, you royal infant," he slapped Borric on the back of the head to emphasize what came next, "then you are still Heir Presumptive."

Borric turned to study James's face. The point of James's message was still lost on the young Prince. "So?"

"So, ninny, as it is unlikely that our good King, your

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"May heaven forfend," interjected Locklear.

Borric looked around the room. The two Sergeants had stepped back, as the pretense of a boxing lesson was forgotten. "King?"

"Yes, you stone-crowned dolt," said Locklear. "If we're still alive, we'll have to kneel before you and pretend you know what you're doing."

"So," continued James, "your father has decided that it's time for you to stop behaving like the spoiled child of a rich cattle merchant and start acting like a future King of Isles."

Eriand came to stand beside his brother, leaning upon him slightly. "So why not just simply"—he winced as he moved the wrong way, straining his reinjured side—"tell us what's going on?"

James said, "I convinced your father the lesson

boxers—"somewhat gifted students of fisticuffs." He stepped away. "But in nineteen years since your birth you've never given a single sign that you're anything other than spoiled, self-indulgent children. Not Princes of the realm!" His voice rose and his tone turned angry. "And when we're done with you, you'll be acting the role of a Crown Prince instead of a spoiled child."

Borric stood crestfallen. "Spoiled child?"

Eriand grinned at his brother's discomfort. "Well,

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that's it, then, isn't it? Borric shall have to mend his ways, and you and Father will be happy—"

James's wicked grin turned on Eriand. "As will you, my lovely! For if this child of foolish nature should go and get his throat cut by the angry husband of a Keshian court lady, it's you who'll wear the Doin crown in

discovered a restraining hand upon his chest.

"Not so fast," said James. "You haven't finished your lesson."

"Ah, Uncle Jimmy—" began Eriand.

"You've made your point—" said Borric, anger in his voice.

"I think not," answered the Baron. "You're still a pair of rude sods." Turning to the two Sergeants, he said, "If you please, continue."

Baron James signaled for Locklear to accompany him as he quickly left the two young Princes readying themselves for a professionally administered beating. As the two nobles left the court, James motioned to Lieutenant William. "When they've had enough, get them to their quarters. Let them rest and see they eat, then insure that they are up and ready to see His Highness by

Accusation

The boy cried out.

Borric and Eriand watched from the window of their parents' private chamber as Swordmaster Sheldon pressed his attack on young Prince Nicholas. The boy shouted again in eager excitement as he executed a clever parry and counterthrust. The Swordmaster retreated.

Borric scratched at his cheek as he observed, "The boy can scamper about, for certain." The angry bruise from the morning's boxing practice was darkening.

Eriand agreed. "He's inherited Father's skills with a blade. And he manages to do right well despite his bad leg."

Borric and Eriand both turned as the door opened and their mother entered. Anita waved her ladies in

"No, Nicky! You should have seen it coming," shouted Eriand, though the glass window prevented his words from reaching his younger brother.

Anita laughed. "He tries so hard."

Borric shrugged as they turned away. "Still, he does well enough for a boy. Not much worse than when we were his age."

Eriand agreed. "The monkey—"

Suddenly his mother turned on him and slapped him hard across the face. Instantly, the women in the other corner of the room ceased their whispers and stared in

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wide-eyed amazement at their Princess. Borric looked at his brother whose astonishment matched his own. Not once in the nineteen years of their lives had their

ment. Your first day back in the palace and within five minutes of speaking with you he was in tears again.

"Arutha was right. I've let you go unpunished for your trespasses too long." She turned as if to leave.

Borric, seeking to rescue his brother and himself from the embarrassment of the moment said, "Ah, Mother. You did send for us? Was there something else you wanted to discuss?"

Anita said, "I didn't send for you."

"I did."

The boys turned to see their father standing quietly at the small door that opened between his study and the family room, as Anita called his part of the royal apartment. The brothers glanced at one another and knew their father had been observing long enough to have witnessed the exchange between mother and sons.

Eriand made a display of stiff muscles and said, "Well, enough, Father, given the 'instructions' we received this morning." He indicated his tender side was not further injured.

Arutha frowned and shook his head slightly. "I asked Jimmy not to tell me what he had in mind." He smiled a crooked smile. "I just requested he somehow impress

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upon you that there are serious consequences to not doing what is required of you."

Eriand nodded. Borric said, "Well, it is not entirely unexpected. You did order us directly home and we did stop to play a bit before coming to the palace."

"Play . . ." Arutha said, his eyes searching his eldest son's face. ". . . I'm afraid there will be little' time for

paragraph."

Borric read and his eyes widened. "This is sad news, indeed."

Eriand said, "What is it?"

"A message from Lyam," Arutha said.

Borric handed it to his brother. "The royal surgeons and priests are certain the Queen will have no more children. There will not be a Royal Heir in Rillanon."

Arutha moved to a door at the back of the royal chambers and said, "Come with me."

He opened the door and moved up a flight of stairs. His sons followed quickly after, and soon all three stood on the top of an old tower, near the center of the royal palace, overlooking the city of Krondor. Arutha spoke

He glanced at Borric and Eriand. "Your grandfather did much the same when he was a boy, or so our old Swordmaster, Fannon, once told me." Arutha spent a moment lost in memory. "I was about your age when command of the garrison fell to me, boys." Both sons had heard tales of the Riftwar and their father's part in

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it, but this wasn't the same sort of old stories they had heard swapped by their father and their uncle, Laurie, or Admiral Trask over dinner.

Arutha turned and sat in one of the merlons and said, "I never wanted to be Prince of Krondor, Borric." Eriand moved to sit in the merlon next to his father, as he sensed that Arutha's words were more for his older brother than himself. They had both heard often enough that their father had no wish to rule. "When I was a boy," Arutha continued, "I had no larger desire than to serve as a soldier, perhaps with the border

He scanned the horizon. Their father had always been a direct man, given to direct speech and never at a loss for words to express himself. But he was obviously having difficulty saying what was on his mind. "Borric, when you were much younger, what did you think your life would be like now?"

Borric glanced over at Eriand, then back at his father. A light breeze sprang up and his thick, ill-cut mane of reddish brown hair blew about his face. "I never gave it much thought. Father."

Arutha sighed. "I think I have made a terrible mistake in the manner in which you were raised. When you were both very tiny you were very mischievous and upon one occasion upset me—it was a little thing, a spilled inkwell, but a long parchment was ruined and a scribe's work for a day was lost. I swatted you upon the bottom, Borric." The elder brother grinned at the image. Arutha did not return the grin. "Anita made me promise that day that never again would I touch either

Arutha nodded. "You and I have little in common in the manner in which we were raised. Your uncle the King felt our father's leather belt on more than one occasion when he was caught. I only took one beating as a boy. I quickly learned that when Father gave an order, he expected it to be obeyed without question." Arutha sighed, and in that sound both boys heard uncertainty from their father for the first time in their lives. "We all assumed Prince Randolph would be King someday. When he drowned, we assumed Lyam would have another son. Even as daughters came and the prospects for a Royal Heir in Rillanon lessened with the years, we just never considered that someday you"—he put his finger on Borric's chest—"would be ruler of the nation."

He looked over at his other son and in an uncharacteristic gesture, reached out and placed his hand over Eriand's. "I am not given to speaking of strong feelings, but you are my sons and I love you both,

Looking Borric directly in the eyes, he said, "Do you? Do you really? Then understand that from this day forth you are no longer my sons alone, Borric. You are both now sons to the Kingdom. Each of you is a Prince of the Blood Royal. You are to be King someday, Borric. Wrap your mind around that fact, for it is so, and nothing this side of death will change that. And from this day on a father's love of his son will no longer shield you from life's harshness. To be a king is to hold men's lives by a thread. A thoughtless gesture will end those lives as certainly as if you had chosen to tear the threads."

To Eriand, he said, "Twins pose a serious threat to peace in our Kingdom, for should old rivalries surface, you'll find some claiming the birth order was reversed, some who will raise your cause without your consent, as an excuse to make war upon old foes."

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"You both have heard the story, of the First King

this far from civil war that day."

Borric said, "Father, why are you telling us this?"

Arutha stood, sighed, and put his hand upon his eldest son's shoulder. "Because your boyhood is at an end, Borric. You are no longer the son of the Prince of Krondor. For I have decided that should I survive my brother, I will renounce my own claim upon the crown in favor of yours." Borric began to protest, but Arutha cut him off. "Lyam is a vigorous man. I may be an old one when he dies, if I don't precede him. It is best if there is not a short rule between Lyam's and your own. You will be the next King of Isles."

Glancing at Eriand, he said, "And you will always stand in your brother's shadow. You will forever be one step from the throne, yet never permitted to sit upon it. You will always be sought out for favor and position, but never your own; you will be seen as a stepping-stone to your brother. Can you accept such a fate?"

must be so. I cannot stress this enough. Never once in the future can you publicly oppose the King's will."

Moving a short way off, he turned and regarded them both. "You have never known anything but peace in our Kingdom. The raids along the border are trivial things."

Eriand said, "Not to those of us who fought those raiders! Men died, Father."

Arutha said, "I speak of nations now, and dynasties,

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and the fate of generations. Yes, men died, so that this nation and its people may live in peace.

"But there was a time when war was always with us, when border skirmishes with Great Kesh were a monthly occurrence and when Quegan galleys took our ships at their leisure, and when invaders from the Tsurani world held part of your grandfather's lands—

children grow without fear of their being used for others' designs." Gazing out over the city, he added, "To sit at day's end with your wife and discuss the small matters of your life, to be at ease."

Borric said, "I think I understand." His voice was subdued.

Eriand only nodded.

Arutha said, "Good, for in a week you leave for Great Kesh, and from this moment forward you are the Kingdom's future." He moved toward the stairs that led down into the palace and halted at them. "I wish I could spare you this, but I can't." Then he was gone.

Both boys sat quietly for a time, then as one turned to look out over the harbor. The afternoon sun beat down, yet the breeze from the Bitter Sea was cooling. In the harbor below, boats moved as punts and barges carried cargo and passengers back and forth between the docks

Both shared the laughter at the prospect of new cities and people, and travel to a land considered exotic and mysterious. And their father's words vanished upon the wind to the east.

Accusation 31

* *

Some institutions linger for centuries, while others pass quickly. Some arrive quietly, others with fanfare. In years past it was considered a general practice to give apprentices and other servants the latter half of the sixth day of the week for themselves. Now the practice had come to include a general closing of businesses on sixthday at noon, with seventhday generally held to be a day of devotions and meditations.

But within the last twenty years another "tradition" had arisen. From the first sixthday following the winter

as long as boys had kicked balls of rags into barrels. Twenty years before, the young Prince Arutha had instructed his Master of Ceremonies to draw up a standard set of rules for the game, more for the protection of his young squires and apprentices, for then the game was rough in the extreme. Now the game had been institutionalized in the minds of the populace; come spring, football returned.

On all levels, from boys playing in open fields up to a City League, with teams fielded by guilds, trading associations, or rich nobles eager to be patrons, players could be seen racing up and down attempting to kick a ball into a net.

The crowd shouted its approval as the Blues' swiftest forward broke away from the pack with the ball, speeding toward the open goal net. The Reds' goalkeeper hunkered down, ready to leap between ball and net. With a clever feint, the Blues' player caused the Reds to overbalance, then shot it past him on his off side. The

James laughed. "Then why don't you go down and play for him?"

Borric and Eriand shared in James's laughter. "Certainly, Uncle Locky. We've heard a hundred times how you and Uncle Jimmy invented this game."

Locklear shook his head. "It was nothing like this." He glanced about the field at the stands erected by an enterprising merchant years before, stands that had been expanded upon and enlarged until as many as four thousand citizens could crowd together to watch a match. "We used to have a barrel at each end and you couldn't stand before the mouth. This net business and goalkeepers and all the other rules your father devised ..."

Borric and Eriand finished for him in unison, ". . . It's not sport anymore."

Both brothers grimaced as one, for they knew they were about to hear the story of the time Locklear was hit from behind by a piece of farrier's steel an apprentice boy had concealed in his shirt. This would lead, then, to a debate between the two Barons on the general value of rules and which rules enhanced the game and which impeded.

But the lack of further comment from James caused Borric to turn. James had his eyes focused not on the game below which was drawing to a close, but upon a man down near the end of the row upon which the Baron sat, one row behind the Princes. Rank and a well-placed bribe had given the sons of the Prince of Krondor two of the best seats for the match, at the mid-field line halfway up the stands.

James said, "Locky, is it cold?"

Wiping perspiration from his brow, Locklear said,

need to wear such a heavy robe?"

Locklear glanced past his companion and noticed a man sitting at the end of the bench, muffled in a large robe. "A priest perhaps?"

"I know of no order that has members with an interest in football." James glanced away as the man turned toward him. "Watch him over my shoulder, but not as if you're listening to everything I'm saying. What's he doing?"

"Nothing presently." Then a horn was blown, signaling the end of the match. The Blues, a team sponsored by the Millers Guild and the Worshipful Association of Iron Mongers, had defeated the Reds, a team sponsored by a group of nobles. As such sponsorship was well-known among those in attendance, the result of the match met with general approval.

As the crowd began to depart, the man in the robe

Eriand had been, and the man raised a hand to his neck. It was a gesture never finished, for as his fingers neared the dart protruding from his throat, he collapsed.

Locklear was only an instant behind James to react. As James and the twins went sprawling below, accompanied by angry shouts as spectators were knocked about, Locklear had his sword out and was leaping toward the robed and cowled figure. "Guards!" he shouted, as an honor guard was stationed just below the viewing stands.

The sounds of boots pounding upon wooden stairs answered his call almost instantly as soldiers of the Prince raced to intercept the fleeing figure. With little concern for bruises caused, the guardsmen roughly shoved innocent onlookers out of their way. With the silent understanding mobs possess, suddenly everyone

over the side, falling a full dozen feet to the earth below. A heavy thud and an exclamation of pain could be heard by Locklear as he reached the railing.

Sprawled upon the ground, two stunned commoners sat inspecting the unmoving form that lay next to them. One man pushed himself back without standing while the other crawled. Locklear vaulted over the rail and landed upon his feet, sword point leveled at the robed figure. The form upon the ground stirred, then leaped at the young Baron.

Almost taken by surprise, Locklear let the man get inside his guard. The robed man had his arms around Locklear's waist as he drove him back into the supports of the viewing stand.

Locklear's breath burst from his lungs as he struck the heavy wooden beams, but he managed to strike the man behind the ear with his sword hilt. The man staggered away, obviously intent upon escape rather than

and hurried after.

In the sudden darkness under the stands, the man could be hiding anywhere. "In here!" Locklear yelled, in reply to an inquiring shout, and within seconds a half-dozen guardsmen were standing behind him. "Spread out and be alert."

The men did as they were bidden and slowly advanced beneath the viewing stands. The men closest to the front were forced to stoop, as the lowest risers of the

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stands were but four feet off the ground. One soldier walked along, poking his sword into the gloom, against the fugitive having crawled under the frontmost stands to hide. Above them the sounds of citizens leaving the stands filled the gloom with a thunderous clatter of sandals and boots upon wood, but after a few minutes, the noise diminished.

were quickly unpinning and the combatants were pulled up. Locklear grinned as he saw that one of them was James and the other Borric. Looking down, he could see the still form of the man in robes. "Drag him out into the light," he ordered the guards. To James he said, "Is he dead?"

"Not unless you broke his neck jumping on him that way. You damn near broke mine."

"Where's Eriand?" asked Locklear.

"Here," came an answering voice in the gloom. "I : was covering the other side of the fray in case he got past these two," he indicated James and Borric.

"Nursing your precious side, you mean," shot back Borne with a grin.

Eriand shrugged. "Maybe."

James was instantly on his knees, forcing open the man's mouth. He sniffed and said, "Poisoned himself."

"Who is he?" said Borric.

"And why was he trying to kill you, Uncle Jimmy?" said Eriand.

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"Not me, you idiot," snapped James. He pointed at Borric. "He was trying to kill your brother."

A guard approached. "My Lord, the man struck by the dart is dead. He died within seconds of his wounding."

Borric forced himself to a nervous grin. "Why would anyone wish to kill me?"

tunic. "James, look here."

Baron James peered down at the dead man. His skin was dark, even darker than Cardan's, marking him as Keshian by ancestry, but those of Keshian ancestry were common in this part of the Kingdom. There were brown- and black-skinned people in every strata of Krondorian society. But this man wore odd clothing, a tunic of expensive black silk and soft slippers unlike anything the young Princes had seen before.

James inspected the dead man's hands, and noticed a ring set with a dark gem, then looked for a necklace and found none. "What are you doing?"

"Old habits," was all Jimmy would answer. "He's no Nighthawk," he observed, mentioning the legendary Guild of Assassins. "But this may be worse."

"How?" asked Locklear, remembering all too well when the Nighthawks had sought to kill Arutha twenty

The room was silent. Those who sat in the circle of chairs moved slightly, as discomfort over the attempt upon Borric manifested itself in the creaks of leather and wood, the rustle of cloth, and the clink of jewelry.

Duke Gardan rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "It's

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preposterous. What would Kesh gain in killing a member of your family? Does the Empress wish war?"

Eriand chimed in. "She's worked as hard as anyone to preserve the peace, or at least all the reports say that. Why would she want Borric dead? Who—"

Borric interrupted his brother. "Whoever wants war between the Kingdom and the Empire."

Locklear nodded. "It's such a shallow lie; so transparent an attempt that it is not believable."

James, who leaned against the wall behind Arutha said, "We've managed a fair job already by dispatching a member of the Empress's house. He was a very distant cousin, true, but a cousin, nevertheless."

Gardan returned to rubbing the bridge of his nose, a gesture of frustration more than fatigue. "And what was I supposed to say to the Keshian Ambassador? 'Oh, we've found this young fellow, who seems to be a member of your Royal House. We had no idea he was in Krondor. And we're sorry to tell you he's dead. Oh, by the way, he tried to murder Prince Borric.' "

Arutha leaned back in his chair, his fingers forming a tent before his face, absently flexing in a gesture that all in the room had come to recognize over the years. He glanced at last at James.

"We could dump the body," offered the young Baron.

Gardan said, "I beg your pardon?"

James moved to sit on the edge of Arutha's desk, as the Prince over the years had come to conduct very informal sessions with close advisors and family. "He's not officially a guest in the city. We aren't supposed to know he's here. No one is supposed to know. The only

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Keshians who will know he's here are those who know why he's here. And I doubt any of them will inquire as to his well-being. He's now the forgotten man, unless we call attention to his whereabouts."

Dryly, Borric added, "And his condition."

"We can claim he tried to kill Borric," James acknowledged, "but all we have is a Keshian corpse, a blowgun, and some poisoned darts."

"And a dead merchant," added Gardan.

mative nod. James indicated with a jerk of his head that Locklear should use Royal Guardsmen for the job, and the other young Baron slipped through the door. After a short conference with Lieutenant William outside, Locklear returned to his seat.

Arutha sighed. Looking at James, he said, "Kesh. What else?"

James shrugged. "Hints, rumors. Their new Ambassador is ... an odd choice. He's what they call a 'trueblood,' but not of the Royal House—the assassin would have been a more logical choice. The Ambassador is a purely political appointment. It's rumored that he may actually have stronger influence in Kesh's court than many with royal blood. I can't find any obvious reason why he should be given such an honor—save as a compromise, to appease some faction in court."

Arutha nodded. "While none of this makes apparent sense, still, we must play according to the rules of such

Baron Locklear said, "Highness?"

Looking at the other young Baron, Arutha said, "You will accompany Baron James, as Master of Ceremonies, Chief of Protocol, and the rest of that idiocy. The Imperial Court is dominated by women. We will at last find a use for that infamous Locklear charm. Instruct Captain Valdis he will act in your place as Knight-Marshal. And have Cousin William take over the Household Guard as acting Captain." Arutha drummed his fingers on the table. "I want you," he said to James, "shed of any office and protocol on this journey. Your only title will be 'tutor.' You must be free to come and go as you need."

James had come to understand Arutha's moods as well as any outside his family. A mind as complex and deep as the Prince's was like a chess master's; Arutha was planning every conceivable outcome as many

James said, "Officially. If your Keshian friend has compatriots about, I would prefer they not know our plans." He glanced at Locklear. "A small mounted troop, twenty guards, dressed as mercenaries. Fast horses, and send word to Shamata we're going to need fresh mounts and stores enough for two hundred escorts."

Locklear said, "We'll be arriving in Shamata at the same time as any message and two hundred—"

James cut him off. "We're not going to Shamata. We want them to think we'll travel in state to Shamata. We're going to Stardock."

Chapter Three

Then, from where it entered the sea, the Star River led them further southward, the rugged mountains of the Grey Range always in sight as they entered the lush Vale of Dreams. Years of border wars between the Kingdom and the Empire had seen this rich farming land changing hands many times. Those who lived in this part of the world spoke the languages of the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Empire with equal fluency. And the sight of fourteen armed mercenaries evoked no notice. Many armed bands of men rode the vale.

At the midpoint of the river, near a small waterfall, they forded the currents, making for the south shore. Upon reaching the headwaters of the Star River, the Great Star Lake, they turned to track the shoreline southward, seeking that point closest to the island dominating the center of the lake, Stardock. There they would find the ferry that provided passage from the shore to the island.

Along the banks of the shore they passed tiny fishing

small promontory of land, bringing them their first clear view of the large building upon the island. It

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nearly shone in the orange light of the sunset, while the advancing night behind turned the distant sky violet and grey. "Gods and demons, Uncle Jimmy, look at the size of that place!"

James nodded. "I had heard they were building a massive center for learning, but the tales never did it justice."

Locklear said, "Duke Gardan visited here many years ago. He told me they had laid a huge foundation for the building . . . but this is larger than anything I've seen."

Glancing at the falling light, James said, "If we hurry, we'll make the island within the next two hours. I'd

at every storefront—an extravagance in all but the wealthiest of towns and cities—and children ran after them, shouting and laughing in the general confusion. Beggars and prostitutes asked favors or offered them respectively, and ramshackle taverns stood open to provide the weary traveler with a cool drink, hot meal, and warm company.

Locklear shouted over the noise, "Quite a prosperous little metropolis growing here."

James glanced about at the dirt and squalor. "Quite. The blessings of civilization," he observed.

Borric said, "Perhaps we should investigate one of these small pubs—"

"No," answered James. "They're certain to offer you refreshments at the Academy."

Eriand smiled ruefully. "A sweet and slightly feeble

and turned toward the lake. As James expected, down near the waterfront a large pier had been constructed and several ferries of differing sizes waited to haul goods and people to the island. Despite the late hour, workers still stacked sacks of grain against the need of hauling them the next morning.

Reining in, James called down to the nearest ferryman, "Good evening. We seek passage to Stardock island."

A face, dominated by a hawk-beaked nose, with ill-cut bangs almost hiding the eyes, was revealed as the man glanced over his shoulder and said, "I can make one quick run across, sir. Five coppers a man, sir, but you need stable your horses here."

Jimmy smiled. "How about ten gold pieces for the lot of us, including the mounts?"

Borric was about to respond, when James tapped his arm with a gloved hand and pointed. In the gloom, just out of the light of a guttering torch, a young man in a plain robe of homespun sat at the dockside watching the interplay calmly.

Borric said, "What?"

"The local constable, I expect."

"Him?" said Borric. "He looks more a beggar or monk than any sort of fighting man."

The ferryman nodded. "Right you are, sir. He's our Peacekeeper." He grinned up at James. "You know your way around, sir. Yes, you do. That's one of the magicians from the island. The council that runs the place keeps it peaceful-like over here in Stardock Town, so they make sure that we have the means. He has no sword, young sir," he said to Borric, "but with a wave of

raised his voice, "And as far as hagglin', sir, as much as I do enjoy a good round of lying about how much injury a good profit does my children's diet, the fact is the Academy sets the rates." He scratched his chin. "Suppose you could haggle with that young spellcaster over there, but I expect he'll tell you the same. Given the traffic back and forth, the prices are fair."

"Where is the stable?" James asked, but just then several small boys pushed from the crowd and offered to take their horses.

"The boy's will see your mounts to a clean stable." James nodded and dismounted. The other riders followed suit. Instantly, small hands removed reins from James's grasp as other children did likewise throughout the company. "Very well," said James, "but see they have clean stalls and fresh hay and oats. And have a farrier check shoes, will you?"

James ceased his commentary as something caught

James put the boy down but held onto his shirt front, then leaned down so he was eye to eye with the would-be cutpurse. "Boy, before I was half your size I knew more than twice what you'll ever know about thieving. Do you believe me?" The boy could only nod, so frightened was he at discovery. "Then take my word on the matter. You haven't the knack. You'll end up at the end of a short rope waiting for a long drop before you're twelve if you keep this up. Find an honest trade. Now, if anything is missing when we leave, I'll know who to look for, won't I?" The boy nodded again.

James sent him scurrying and turned to the ferryman. "Then it'll be twenty-four of us on foot to the island."

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At this, the young magician rose to his feet and said, "It's not often we have armed soldiers come to the Academy. May I ask your business?"

James smiled, "Tell him . . . Baron James of Krondor and"—he glanced at the twins—"some of his kinsmen."

A small group waited to welcome the company as the ferry came to rest against the shore with a bump. A loading dock was the only sign that this was the entrance to perhaps the strangest community upon Midkemia, the Academy of Magicians. Workers aided the soldiers as they negotiated the dock. Many were unsteady after their first ride on a flat-bottomed ferry. Lanterns hung from the dock posts, illuminating the welcoming committee.

A short man of middle years, wearing only a black robe and sandals, was at the center of the group. To his right stood a striking, dark-skinned woman with iron-grey hair. An old man in robes stood to his left, a large huntsman in leather tunic and trousers at his shoulder. Behind them two younger men, attired in robes, waited patiently.

i-he man. While they were Princes born, used to some degree of deference and awe at their rank at times, here before them stood a man legends and tales had grown around. "Cousin Pug," Borric said, "thank you for receiving us."

The magician smiled and everyone relaxed. Though nearly forty-eight years old, he looked a man in his early

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thirties. Brown eyes almost shone with warmth and, despite his age, the dark beard couldn't hide an expression that was almost boyish. This youthful face could not belong to the man reputed to be the single most powerful individual in the world.

Eriand and he quickly exchanged greetings, and James stepped forward. "Lord Pug . . ." James began.

"Just Pug, James." He smiled. "Around here we have

James was surprised at how delicate the woman looked. He hadn't seen her for over seven years, but she had been a robust, healthy woman in her early forties, with suntanned cheeks and raven dark hair. Now she looked ten years her husband's senior. "My Lady," said James, bowing over her hand.

The woman smiled and years vanished from her. "Just Katala, James. How is our son?"

James grinned. "William is happy. He is Acting Captain of Arutha's Guard. He is well thought of, and I expect will hold the office when Valdis steps down. And he courts several lovely ladies of the Princess's retinue. He's a fine officer and will rise high."

Pug said, "He should be here—" Seeing his wife's features darken, he said, "I know, dearest, we have put that argument to rest. Now," he said to the Princes, "may I present the others?"

Meecham, a powerful-looking man of advancing

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years, scolded the old magician like a nagging wife.

"You should have stayed in your room. ..."

Kulgan shook off the aiding hand as Eriand moved to take Borric's place before Pug's old master. "I'm old, Meecham, not dying." The man's hair was white as winter's first snow, and the skin was lined and tanned like old leather. But the blue eyes were still bright and alert. "Your Highness," he said to Eriand.

The Prince smiled back. As boys they had delighted in Kulgan's visits, for the old magician had entertained them with stories punctuated by small feats of magic. "Seems we're informal, here. Uncle Kulgan. It's good to see you again. It's been too long."

The two younger men behind were unknown to

The second man looked nearly the twin of the first, save for a full black beard, oiled to ringlets which hung loosely from his cheeks. "And his brother, Watume."

Pug said, "You must all be tired from your journey." He glanced around. "I was expecting our daughter, Gamina, to join us, but she is helping to feed the children and I suppose she was detained. You'll meet her soon enough."

"Now, to your quarters. We have rooms for you in the Academy. You've missed supper, but we'll have hot food delivered to your room. In the morning, we can visit."

The small company moved up the shoreline, to where they could see past the monstrous building that dominated the island. Fully forty stories tall at points, its central focus was a lofty spire that reached another hundred feet above the roof. It seemed little more than an unrailed stairway around a column, topped by a tiny

ing," Pug remarked. "That is where those of the Greater Path learn their first mastery, and leave their apprenticeship behind."

The two dark-skinned brothers cleared their throats in a meaningful way and Pug smiled. "Some of us have differing feelings as to how much 'outsiders' should be allowed to know."

Rounding the shore, they saw a rather busy town at the other end of the building. Cleaner than its twin upon the shoreline, it was still its equal in activity. Despite the advancing hour, many people were in the streets upon one errand or another. "Stardock Town," said Katala, pride evident in her voice.

Locklear said, "I thought the town upon the shore was Stardock Town."

Pug said, "So those who live there call it. But this is the true town upon the island of Stardock. This is where

to a series of doors upon each side of a long hall. "We're lacking in regal accommodations, I'm afraid," he said, "but these guest cells are warm, dry, and comfortable. You'll find a basin for washing, and if you leave your dirty travel clothing outside, someone will see it is washed. The garderobe is at the far end of the hall. Now, rest well and we'll have a long talk in the morning."

Pug bid them good night and the twins quickly found the food waiting for them in their cells. Up and down the hall the night was full of the noise of soldiers shedding traveling armor and arms, splashing water, and the clink of knives against serving plates. Soon all were

years have not been kind to some fine people." Then his manner brightened, "Or it could be my youthful crimes coming back to haunt me. I'm just not comfortable with the idea of spending the night in any room referred to as a 'cell.'"

With a wry smile and a nod of agreement, Locklear bid his companion good night. A moment later, James stood alone in the long, empty hall. Something was not right. But he left that feeling for the next day. Now he needed food and a wash.

With the sound of a bird chirping outside his window, James was awake. As was his habit, the young Baron of the Prince's court rose before the sun. To his surprise, he discovered his clothing had been washed and folded and left just inside his door. A light sleeper by nature and quick to full wakefulness by training, he was discomforted that anyone could have opened his door and not disturbed him. James pulled on the clean tunic and trousers, foregoing the heavy traveling boots. Since

asleep, but his stealth was not born of consideration, it was habitual. As a boy in the Poor Quarter of the city, James had earned his livelihood as a thief, and moving without sound was second nature.

Opening the outside door, he slipped through and closed it silently behind. The sky had already turned slate grey and the eastern horizon was showing the blush of the approaching sunrise. The only sounds were the calling of birds and the thud of a single axe falling, as

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someone cut wood for an early morning fire. James moved away from the huge building of the Academy and made his way along the path that led to the village.

The sound of wood being cut fell away as that unknown farmer or fisherman's wife finished the task. After a hundred yards, the path diverged, one part heading toward the village while a smaller path led

James nodded. "I thought I'd be the first up."

Pug kept his eyes fastened upon the horizon. "No, I sleep very little."

"The wear doesn't show. I don't think you look a day older than when I last saw you seven years ago."

Pug nodded. "There are things about myself I am just discovering, James. When I took upon myself the mantle of sorcerer . . ." his voice trailed off. "We've never really talked, have we?"

James shook his head. "Not about anything profound, if that's what you mean. It's not exactly as if our paths cross frequently. We first met at Arutha and Anita's wedding," he ticked off on his fingers as he spoke, "and again after the battle at Sethanon." Both men glanced at each other and nothing needed to be said between them about the cataclysmic battle that had taken place

James waited. He had little desire to talk about his past, though it was well enough known to anyone of rank in the city of Krondor, and to everyone in the palace. "I was a thief."

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"Jimmy the Hand," said Pug. "Yes, but what sort of boy were you?"

James considered the question for a moment, then answered. "Brash. That's the first word that comes to mind." He watched as the dawn unfolded. Neither man spoke for several minutes as each saw the fingers of light striking the clouds hanging in the east. The fiery rim of the disc of the sun began to appear. James said, "I ... was also foolish at times. I had no idea of there being any limit to what I could do. I have no doubt that had I continued that existence, I'd have finally taken one big chance too many. I'd most likely be dead by now."

James considered. Without false modesty, he said, "Brilliant, I suppose you could say, or gifted at least. Things often seemed obvious to me that confused many of those around me. At least the world seemed a more obvious place then. I'm not so sure I wasn't a great deal smarter as a boy than I am now as a man."

Pug motioned that James should walk with him and started slow progress toward the water's edge. "When I was a boy, my modest ambitions seemed the most splendid things. Now ..."

"You seem troubled," James ventured.

"Not as you would understand it," Pug answered. James turned and in the grey light saw an unreadable expression on Pug's face. "Tell me of the attempt upon Borric. You were closest to him."

James said, "News travels fast."

was Keshian is hardly in doubt, but all those clues that point to the Royal House of Kesh being at the root of the

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attempt . . . it's too clear. I think someone seeks to dupe us." He turned as they lost sight of the town, regarding the upper stories of the Academy. "You have many Keshians here?"

Pug nodded. "And from Roldem, Queg, the Peaks of the Quor, and other places. Here we pay little attention to matters of nation. We are concerned with other issues."

James said, "Those two who met with us last night ..."

"Watume and Kbrsh, yes. They are Keshian. From the city of Kesh itself." Before James could speak, Pug said, "They are not Imperial agents. I would know. Trust me.

strikes many in the court as odd."

"And dangerous," Pug added. James turned to study the magician's face. "Which is why I work diligently to see that the Academy never partakes in national conflicts. On any side."

James considered his words. "There are few among the nobility who are as comfortable with the idea of magic as our King and his brother. Growing up with Kulgan in the household as they did, they think nothing about it. But others ..."

"Still would see us driven from cities and towns, or hung, or burned at stakes. I know." Pug said, "In the twenty years we have worked here, much has changed . . . yet so little has changed."

Finally James said, "Pug, I feel something odd in you. I detected it last night. What is it?"

in the shallow of the lake. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

James could only agree as he took in his surroundings.

"This is a beautiful place."

"It wasn't so when I first came here," answered Pug.

"The legend is that this lake was formed by a falling star, hence its name. But this island was not the cooled body of that star, which I calculate could have been no larger than this." He held his hands apart about six inches. "I think the star cracked the crust of the earth and lava rose up to create this island. It was rocky and barren when I first came here, with only a bit of tenacious grass at the water's edge, and a few hearty bushes here and there. I brought what you see here, the grass, the trees, the animals." He grinned, and years vanished from his face. "The birds found their own way over."

James considered the groves of trees nearby and the deep meadow grass he saw everywhere. "A not inconsiderable feat."

If I have any say in the matter, there'll be no war between the Kingdom and Kesh in my lifetime. But then, I may not have much to say about the matter."

"You ride a dangerous course."

"It's not the first time. I wish circumstances could have spared the Princes the need to go."

"They are their father's sons," observed Pug. "They must go where duty requires. Even if it means risking much to gain little."

Pug resumed his walk along the shore and James fell into step at his side.

James could only nod at that. "Such is the burden of their birthright."

"Well," said Pug, "there are short respites, such as this one, along the way. Why don't you go over there?" He

meal."

James smiled. "Thank you, it sounds just the thing. I'm so used to having much work before breaking my fast. A pleasant way to fill an hour or so will be welcomed."

Pug turned back toward the town and after a few steps said, "Oh, be careful of swimming in the shore grasses. It's easy to get turned about and lose your way. The wind makes them bend toward the island, so should you get lost, simply swim in that direction until you feel land underfoot. Then walk out."

"Thank you. I'll be cautious. Good morning.

"Good morning, James. I'll see you at breakfast."

As Pug returned to the Academy, James headed toward the stand of trees the magician had indicated.

joining the lake there. It was but no more than twenty yards from pool to lake. He glanced about. The pool and this small stretch of shoreline were screened on three sides by trees affording him ample privacy. James removed his tunic and trousers and stuck a foot in the pool. It was almost hotter than he cared for in his own bath! He sank in and let the warmth infuse him, relaxing tense muscles.

Tense muscles? He wondered. He had just awoke. Why should he feel tension. His own voice answered, because much risk is undertaken sending two boys to play at a game of Keshian court politics older than the house of conDoin. He sighed. Pug was a strange man but a wise and powerful one; he was an adopted kins-

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man to the King and a Duke. Perhaps James should ask Pug's opinion. Then he thought against it. As much as Pug was reputed to have been a savior to the Kingdom

bones, and minutes later his mind floated. He ran down a street, and a hand grabbed him by the arm. He closed his eyes in remembrance. His first memory. He could have been no more than three. It was his mother, pulling him inside her whore's crib, out of the sight of slavers who were prowling the night. He remembered being held tightly while she clamped her hand over his mouth. Later she would be gone. When he was older, he knew she was dead, but all he could remember of that night was the man with the loud voice shouting at her and hitting her and the red everywhere. Jimmy put the ugly memory aside as he fell into the warmth of the water. Soon he dozed.

He awoke without moving. From the angle of the sun, he couldn't have dozed for more than minutes, perhaps a half-hour at best. The morning was quiet, but something had disturbed him. He had somewhat outgrown his childhood habit of coming to his feet with a dagger in his hand—it had proved quite disturbing to the servants in the palace—but he still kept a dagger close by.

nothing. There was a strange feeling about the place and he couldn't find a name for it. It was as if he had entered a room a moment after someone had left

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through another door; without knowing why, he knew someone had just past beyond his view.

Instincts born of city dangers set off a primitive alarm in his head, an alarm that had saved him from danger too many times before to be ignored. Yet this alarm didn't have the echoing ring of danger to it, rather it was excitement. Years before, James had learned the discipline of the night, remaining motionless, keeping one's mind distant from the concerns of the moment so sudden movement wouldn't trigger a response. He relaxed his breathing and kept still. He glanced over the rim again, and the echo of another's passing was gone. The small inlet looked as it had before.

Lacking a satisfying answer, he heaved himself out of the pool and raced headlong for the lake, yelling a boy's shout of frustration released. He dove under and came up spitting water. A sound of relief escaped him as the cold lake seemed to shock him to full wakefulness.

He was an indifferent swimmer but enjoyed the occasion from time to time. Like most children of Krondor's Poor Quarter, when the hot winds of summer blew he had sought relief at the harborside, diving from the piers into the salt water and refuse. The sensation of clean water upon his body was something he had remained ignorant of until well into his thirteenth year.

James found himself swimming lazily toward the far side of the inlet. The trees and reeds cut into the water, providing a series of narrow passages to whatever lay upon the other side of the inlet. He picked his way through, half-swimming, half-paddling, until he came to a thick stand of reeds and grasses. He saw the grasses

was in the grasses, seeing stalks rise high above his head as he felt their ticklish caress while he swam. After a few minutes of swimming this way, he righted himself and glanced about.

Things appeared different and the way back not apparent. Calm by nature, he found the notion of swimming in circles within the reeds an unappealing one but not a fearful one. He remembered Pug's words and saw the grasses all bending to his left. He would simply swim to where he felt ground underfoot and walk out.

Within a minute, he felt the shore under his toes. He walked through thick reeds and tall grasses, toward a line of trees at the water's edge. The hanging branches and thick greenery plunged him into shadows. While he was still up to his chest in the water. He could only see a few feet in any direction, and the morning light made everything a pattern of murk and blinding blue-white sky above. James followed the rising bottom until he was in water below his waist. He felt foolish to be strid-

felt land under him.

A birdcall above him made him wonder if the creature was laughing at his clumsy progress. Sighing, he continued toward the shore, which was but a few yards away, judging by the glimpses of land he got between the trees. With the water at his knees, he was confronted with an impassable barrier of trees and reeds, a rocky overhang rising up to shoulder height. He moved to his right, toward what seemed a closer exit from the foliage that conspired to trap him, and again felt a drop beneath his feet. He settled down to chest-high water and pushed through a very thick curtain of reeds. His

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progress was slow and he could only move a few feet at a time. His overwhelming feeling was one of unalloyed stupidity for finding himself so distant from where he wanted to be. Pleasant swim before breakfast, indeed.

wet from her head as she squeezed water from it, a pose which conspired to display her hips and buttocks in a slightly exaggerated and flattering pose.

James's breath caught in his chest. The same mixed feeling of alarm and excitement struck him like a hammer blow. He felt as embarrassed at his intrusion into her privacy as he would have felt had she found him at his own pool. Conflicting signals to hold motionless, move back, say something, not be discovered, all clashed together and paralyzed him.

Again his boyhood training overrode conscious thought and he froze in place. Then another thought intruded, and he felt his stomach tighten as a hot rush of excitement gathered in his stomach and groin. Almost aloud he said. It's about the most beautiful bottom I've ever seen.

Instantly the young woman turned about, her hands flying up to her mouth, as if startled by a noise. In that

mind in an instant. A thousand instants of recognition flooded through James, and in each he knew the young woman before him was at once the most wonderful and

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terrifying sight he had ever beheld. Then those beautiful pale blue eyes narrowed and suddenly pain exploded in James's head.

He fell back as if struck by a weapon, and his voice cried out hollow in his own ears as he went beneath the water's surface. Sharp knives of hot agony filled his mind as water filled his mouth. James sank into the murk of the water as he lost consciousness.

In a place which was not a place James swam, drowning in memories: his playing upon the street cobbles and never a moment passing without the fear. Strangers were a danger, yet every day brought strangers into his mother's house. Men who were loud and frightening

Then the fights with the other boy for the bone and the bread crust left out behind the inns and taverns, eating the raw wheat and corn that spilled from under the grain wagons at the dockside. And the drops of bitter wine in the almost empty bottle. The occasional coin from a generous passerby to buy a hot pie. Hunger was always there.

A voice in the dark, no face to remember, asked him if he was clever. He had been clever. Very clever. His beginning with the Mockers.

Danger around, at all times. No friends, no allies, only the rules of the guild to protect Jimmy the Hand. But he was gifted; the Upright Man forgave small trespasses from one who brought in so much wealth at such an early age.

Then the man with the crooked smile reappeared. Jimmy had been twelve. It had been nothing of proud

len lips and his eyes bulging, while the son of a murdered whore watched through a crack in the ceiling of the flop house where he lay. Jimmy had felt no triumph, but somehow he hoped his mother rested better. He never knew his mother's name. He felt as if he wanted to cry but didn't know how. He had cried twice . . . no, three times in honesty. When Anita lay stricken and when he thought Arutha dead. That had been grief, and it was not a sign of weakness or shame. But he had cried in the darkness when trapped in the cave with the rock serpent, before Duke Martin had saved him. He could never admit to his fear.

Other images: his incredible, almost inhuman skills in the calling. His discovery that his fate was linked to great things when he helped to hide the Prince and Princess of Krondor from their captors during the reign of Mad King Rodric. His death duel with a Nighthawk upon the rooftops of the city, saving Arutha's life, though he had not known it at the time. His travels twice to the Northlands and the great battles of Armen-

in rank after Duke Gardan in the Prince's court, all became a haze of pleasant thoughts, the only pleasant thoughts in his life. Faces passed, some named, others nameless. Thieves, assassins, nobles, peasants. Women. He remembered many, for early on he had developed a taste for the attentions of women and, as a rising young nobleman, had his choice of many companions. But there was always something lacking. Something important. Then a nude figure wading in the lake as she squeezed water from her hair. The most stunning vision he had beheld.

Then a face with pale blue eyes, and lips like pink roses. A concerned face, which peered into James's be-

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ing. Something magical and beautiful burst within James, and again he wanted to cry. A sadness filled him with awful joy and he cringed before those clear eyes. They looked inside and saw things, and he had no

James awoke upon the shore, a cry of pain and fear upon his lips. He sat bolt upright, his arm above his head, a child avoiding a blow from above. He was still damp, and naked. A voice said, "The pain will pass."

James turned, and as he did so the terrible aching inside slipped away. He turned to find the young woman sitting upon the shore a few feet away from him. She sat with her legs pulled up before her, arms around her knees, still without her clothing.

James had never so much wished to flee in his life. No experience filled him with such nameless dread as seeing this beautiful young woman sitting near. Tears rose unbidden to his eyes. "Who are you?" he whispered. Yet as he wished to flee, so much more so did he long to be close to this woman.

Slowly she rose, unself-conscious in her nudity, and came to stand before him. She knelt until her face was

to grope for a concept—"those words are not right. But I know what you think unless you try to keep your thoughts from me."

He attempted to gather his wits about him as he fought down the aching pain inside. "What happened? Over there . . ." He indicated the reed-filled pool.

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"Your thoughts startled me, and I reacted without reason. I can defend myself, as you discovered."

James raised a hand to his head, a memory of pain there. "Yes," was all he could say.

She reached out and touched his cheek softly. "I am sorry. It was not something I would have done knowingly. I can cause much harm to the mind. It is one of the ways my talents could be abused."

James felt hot desire rise up within, but a giddy fearfulness came with it. No stranger to a woman's embrace, he suddenly felt a child with his first stolen moment of love. Words he had never thought to hear himself utter came unbidden. "I am frightened," he whispered.

"Don't be," she whispered back.

Holding him close, she spoke to his mind. When I stunned you, you fell back into the water. Had I not pulled you out, you would have drowned. As I revived you, your mind was open to me, and mine to you. Had you the ability, you would know me as well as I know you, my Jimmy.

James's own voice sounded small and wounded in his ears as he spoke. "How can it ... ?"

"It is," she answered. Then she sat back, rubbing salt

were provided. Pug's family as well as Kulgan and

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Meecham dined with the guests. Two places were empty, next to Katala and Locklear.

Borric chewed a mouthful of fine cheese and wine, while Eriand said, "Cousin Pug, how many people live here now?"

Pug picked lightly at his plate, not eating much. He smiled at his wife and said, "Katala attends the daily business of governing this community." "

Katala said, "We number nearly a thousand families, both here and on the shore. Here, upon the island—" Her words fell away. All at the table turned to see the cause of Katala's truncated speech.

The door at the end of the hall had opened and James

eyes began to brim with tears as a smile spread across her face.

Pug turned to look at James, expectantly.

Locklear said, "James—"

James cleared his throat, and in a self-conscious tone of voice, like a schoolboy reciting before his master, said, "Lord Pug, I—I have the honor to ask permission ... to ask for the hand of your daughter in marriage."

Borric and Eriand's eyes widened in disbelief, then both looked at Locklear. James's life-long companion since coming to the palace sat down heavily with a stunned expression equal to the twins' own. Shaking his head, all he could say was, "Sink me!"

Chapter Four

"You've been shaking your head 'no' as you've been walking for the last couple of minutes. You're arguing with yourself again."

Borric made a sound between a sigh and a grunt. "I'm worried about Uncle Jimmy."

Eriand turned slightly as he picked up the pace so he could examine his brother's face while they walked. The evening sky was turning inky as the middle moon hadn't risen yet. But the balmy evening promised romance for those inclined and able to find willing partners. It was upon such a search the twins were now embarking. As they headed to where the ferry barge was tied, Eriand said, "It's not usual for you to concern yourself with others, let alone someone as capable as Uncle Jimmy."

"That's why I'm worried," said Borric, halting to emphasize the point. He poked his finger on Eriand's chest. " There's nothing dumber in the world than a

"The rest of us except Uncle Jimmy."

"Right," agreed Borric. "My point exactly. He's had his share, we both know that. But he's always kept them at a distance and never made stupid promises. Now he meets this woman and . . ." He paused, at a loss for words.

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"Like magic."

"Exactly!" said Borric. "And what better place to find magic than an island of magicians."

Eriand put a restraining hand on Borric as his brother started to walk again. "You think this is some sort of spell? An enchantment?"

"Ah, a very special enchantment," Said a gravelly

"What do you mean?" asked Borric, as if his suspicions had been confirmed.

Kulgan laughed. He stuck out his hand for a moment and then waved it impatiently. "Well just don't stand there. Give an old man some help. My knees are older than creation!"

Eriand assisted the old magician as Kulgan pulled himself upright, one hand in Eriand's, the other on a large wooden staff. The magician continued, "I'll walk with you to the ferry landing. I assume you're going across to find some trouble. Boys your age always are interested in trouble."

"The enchantment?" said Borric impatiently.

The old man laughed. "You know, when your grandfather was a little older than you, he was just as unwilling to wait. When he wanted an answer, he wanted it right now, by damn. It took a lot of years for him to get

its? What do you spoiled children know of limits? Oh, maybe you've had to use your swords now and again, but limits?" He halted for a moment, and leaned upon the staff. Tapping his head with one finger, he said, "This. Your brain. When you bring all your faculties to

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bear on a problem, try every conceivable solution in your mind, and still have no solution, then you'll understand what limits I'm talking about."

"Father always said you were one of his most demanding teachers," said Eriand with a grin.

"Ha!" snorted Kulgan. "Now Father Tully, there was an exacting taskmaster." His eyes looked off in the distance, reflecting for a moment, then he continued, "It's a pity you never knew him. You were babies when he died. Tragic loss. One of the finest minds I've ever known . . . even if he was a priest," he added, unable

added, "You don't know half of everything yet."

"Ow," Borric said, reflexively dancing back.

As Eriand began to laugh, Kulgan gave him a bark on the shins as well, saying, "Just to keep things even."

As both brothers made a show of being in pain, Kulgan said, "Now pay attention. I'm old and I don't have the time to waste repeating myself."

When the twins ceased their little dances of distress, Kulgan said, "The sort of enchantment I am speaking of is nothing you can teach. It's not of the sort of magic men can employ at whim. It's a magic the gods have given to only a few lucky men and women. It's the magic of a love so real and profound that nothing can change you back once you've known it." His eyes again sought distant horizons as he said, "I'm so old I have to work to remember last night's dreams. Yet there are times boyhood recollections come to me as if they were

upon marrying your Uncle Laurie within days of meeting him.

"The point is that you will feel needs in you as you get older, needs that carousing through alehouses with netmenders' daughters will not satisfy, no matter how rosy their cheeks, sweet their laughter, or soft their arms may be. And the bedsilks of nobility's daughters will lose their luster as well."

Both Borric and Eriand exchanged glances, and Eriand said, "That will be some time to come, I think."

Kulgan silenced him with another smack to his shins.

"Don't interrupt. I don't care if you are a prince. I've whacked better men than you and of higher rank. Your uncle, the King, was a poor student and saw the flat of my hand more than once." He sighed. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes, true love. You'll find as you get older that

there's what your young Baron James has discovered. He's a changed man, no doubt about it. You watch and learn. If you're fortunate, you might see what you will likely not know."

Borric sighed and looked at the ground. "Because I am to be King?"

Kulgan nodded. "Precisely. You're not as thick as I took you to be. You will marry for the good of the nation. Oh, you'll have plenty of opportunity to satisfy itches with willing ladies of many ranks, no doubt. I know your uncle has given you at least a half-dozen cousins born on the wrong side of the blanket. Several of them will no doubt be rising in the ranks of the nobility by the time it's over with and done. But that's not the same thing.

"James has found that person whom the gods placed here to make his life complete. Don't doubt for a moment that it was fated, and don't think for a moment that he was taken unawares. What seems to you to be a

"Precisely," said Kulgan, pleased with himself. He smiled as he studied the Princes for a moment. "You know, you two are nowhere near the stupid pair of street thugs you resemble. Blood will tell after all, I guess. Now, you'll most likely forget everything I've told you five minutes after you find an alehouse with a card game and a couple of amply endowed serving women looking to snag a rich gift from a young noble.

"But with luck, at some critical time in your life, you will recall what I've said. It will help you make choices you must make, both of you, for the good of your nation."

Borric shrugged. "It seems that the last few weeks have been dedicated to constantly reminding us of our duty."

"As it should be." Kulgan studied the boys. "You have been placed upon a high seat, Borric, and you one step

upon Arutha. That's the sort of man your father is. You will come to know him better as you get older."

Both brothers said nothing. At last Kulgan turned back toward the imposing edifice of Stardock. "It's turning cool. I'll find me a fire to warm myself next to. You go find whatever trouble you can." After he took a few steps, Kulgan halted, turned and said, "And be cautious of some of our fisher lads. Make free with their women and they'll have their cleaning knives out before they remember you're royalty." He studied the twins' faces a long moment, then added, "Take care of yourselves, boys."

Borric and Eriand watched the old magician head

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back to the entrance of the main building of the Academy, then resumed their walk to the ferry. As they came to the beach, Eriand said, "What do you think?"

The wind blew softly as Gamina and James walked along the shore, silently sharing the evening. James felt both invigorated and exhausted. In his thirty-seven years he had shared little of himself with anyone. True intimacy seemed impossible for him, but in Gamina he found someone able to break past previously unbreachable defenses. No, it wasn't that way, he amended silently to himself. She hadn't broken past anything. She simply found the door waiting for her to open.

A scented breeze blew out of the south, the fragrance of distant orchards and fields in bloom across the Vale of Dreams. Middle moon rose in the east, a copper disc in the dark night approaching. James turned to his intended bride. He marveled at the arch over her neck, the way her fine pale hair seemed to float about her face and shoulders, a nimbus of white tinged smoky grey in the twilight. Her pale eyes regarded him, then she smiled and his spirit leaped. "I love you," she said.

"I love you," he said, not quite believing his own joy.

her neck and felt her shiver slightly in response. "I would be more content within my mind with you safely here."

Would you? she asked. / wonder. . . . She stepped slightly away and studied his face in the fading light. "I fear you might retreat within yourself, Jimmy, and after a time you would convince yourself what we have

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found here was an illusion and those barriers against love and pain would then be restored, stronger, higher, and more firmly buttressed than ever before. You would find a reason to journey back to Krondor another way, and you would find reasons to postpone your return to Stardock. For a time you would convince yourself that you intended to come for me as soon as possible, but there would be one reason then another to keep you away. And always one reason or another to keep you from sending for me. After a time, you would simply

Touching his cheek, she smiled, and the warmth of her loving gaze swept away the fear again, as it had a dozen times during the day. Gamina had read James's heart and soul when she had revived him upon the lakeshore and had shared herself with him, both her body and heart. Still, trust for James was grudgingly surrendered, even to the woman who had touched him as no other had. "No, love, I do not underestimate you. But I also do not underestimate fear. My talents are not just magic as others upon this island know it. My skills are also in healing the mind and heart. I can share things with those who are weakened in spirit and sick of mind, and help them, sometimes. I can listen to dreams. And I have seen what fear can do. You fear to be left again as you were by your mother."

James knew she was right. Even as she spoke, the feelings of that dreadful night returned, when as a child of six or seven he stole out of his mother's crib, the stickiness upon the floor her blood, the horror of know-

only connection to life. And as it had before, the pain slipped away, leaving behind a tired but warm and relieved feeling. Something angry and festering within him for years had been lanced, and poisonous fear and loneliness were draining away. The wound wouldn't heal in the space of a single day, or even many days, but in time it would heal and James of Krondor would be the better man for the healing. Her voice came to him as she said. And it is my fear speaking, as well. Doubt can make us all vulnerable.

"I have no doubt," he answered simply. She smiled as she again hugged him tight.

The sounds of footfalls upon the ground and a pointed clearing of a throat signaled Locklear's arrival. "Sorry to intrude, but Pug would like to see you, James." He smiled apologetically. "And your mother would like you to join her in the kitchen, Gamina."

James said, "You've got something on your mind. Out with it."

Locklear's words came in a rush. "Look, we've known each other, what, twenty-two years? In all that time I've never known you to show the least bit of interest in women—" James gave him a strange look and he amended that to, "I mean interest in marriage, at least. Now, out of nowhere, you suddenly walk in and announce to all that you're getting married! I mean, she's certainly a beauty, with that nearly white hair and all, but you've known—"

"I've known no one, nothing, like Gamina," Jimmy interrupted. He stopped his companion with a restraining hand to Locklear's chest. "I don't know if someone like you can understand, Locky, but she's seen inside of me. She's seen all there is to see, the bad I've done and felt, the things that I've only hinted at to you,

like you'?"

James halted again. "Look, you're the best friend—perhaps the only real friend—I've ever known, but when it comes to women . . . you have no ... consideration. You're charming, you're attentive, you're persistent, and when the lady in question wakes up in your bed, you're gone. Why some woman's brother or father hasn't run a sword through you . . . When it comes to you and women, Locky, you just are not very constant."

"And you are?"

"I am now," James answered. "As constant as water running downhill."

Locklear said, "Well, we'll see what Arutha has to say about this headlong flight into matrimony. We court Barons need his permission to marry, remember?"

James entered the building and made his way down a long corridor to the base of the tower, the top of which housed Pug's study. He mounted a spiral stairway and climbed until he reached the door of the study. As he raised his hand to knock, the door swung open to admit him. Stepping through the portal, he was not surprised to discover Pug alone in the study, some distance away from the door. After he was inside, the door closed behind James without apparent aid.

"We need to speak," Pug said, as he rose and beckoned James to a large window. Looking out, he pointed at small lights which dotted the far shore. "People," he said.

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James shrugged. He knew the sorcerer hadn't called him to his presence to discuss the obvious.

"When we came to Stardock over twenty years ago,

for the most part, things in the area of the Great Star Lake are quiet.

-"And what caused that change?" he asked James.

James said, "It doesn't take a genius to deduce your presence here caused that change. Pug."

Pug turned away from the view of the lake shore and said, "Jimmy, when we first met I was a young man and you were a boy. But in the time between then and now I've encountered more than most men could imagine in a dozen lifetimes." With a simple wave of his hand he created a cloud in the middle of the room, less than two feet in diameter. It shimmered then appeared a hole in the air, through which James could see a strange hall. It was a hall hanging in the midst of a grey nothingness, along the path of which doors were spaced every dozen yards or so. The grey void of nothingness between the doors was so absolute that even the black of night seemed rich and alive in comparison. "The Hall of Worlds," said Pug. "By this path I have ventured to

would become easy to dismiss the concerns of those who live in such a tiny place as the Vale as trivial."

James crossed his arms as he said, "Compared to that, it is trivial."

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Pug shook his head. "Not to those who live here."

James sat without Pug's leave and said, "I know there's a point to this. Pug."

Pug returned to his own chair behind his study table and said, "Yes, there is. Katala is dying."

That news, unexpected as well as shocking, caught James by surprise. "I thought she appeared unwell—but dying. ..."

"There is much we can do here, James, but there are

"I've watched my wife grow old before her time, James, though had this illness not developed I would have had to face this burden eventually. You can see I have not aged measurably. Nor will I in your lifetime. I may not be immortal, but my powers make me long-lived. And I'll not watch my children and grandchildren grow old and wither while I stay as I am.

"I will leave Stardock within hours of Katala's departure. William is firm upon his soldier's path, having forsaken his magic gifts. I wished it were otherwise, but like most fathers I must accept that my own dreams are not necessarily my son's. Gamina has talents, as well, not limited to magic, but rather stemming from an unusual mind. Her mental speech is both magic and natural, but her sensitive nature, her empathy, her caring, these are special gifts."

James nodded. "I can't argue that. Her mind is ... a miracle."

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Gamina this. She was a child burdened with great sadness and pain at an early age—much like you, I suspect."

James gave a slight nod. "We've shared things. . . ."

"No doubt," said Pug with a wry smile. "But that is as it should be with lovers, husbands and wives. I will lose much when Katala departs, more than perhaps even she suspects." For an instant. Pug stood exposed to James and the young Baron saw a man isolated from others by unknowable responsibility, and one of the few who could ease that great weight, one who could give him a few moments of warmth and comfort, was slowly leaving him. For just a moment, Pug revealed the depth of his pain, then the mask was again in place. "For when she leaves I will begin to concern myself with those grand issues I've given you but a glimpse of, and leave

ings."

James let out a long sigh of relief. "I hope Arutha is as understanding. I need his permission to marry."

"This is no difficulty." Pug moved his hands and created a grey smoky sphere in the air. Within it, shapes began to form, then suddenly James was looking at Arutha in his study in Krondor, as if a window appeared between two rooms but a wall apart. Arutha glanced up as if at them and with an uncharacteristic display of surprise, half-rose from his chair. "Pug?"

Pug spoke, "Yes, Highness. I am sorry to intrude, but I have a favor to ask."

Arutha sat down with obvious relief there was both a reasonable and friendly cause for the sudden apparition in his study. He put down a quill with which he'd been writing and said, "What may I do for you?"

"I would like to see her married ... to a man of some rank. One of your young court Barons."

Arutha looked past Pug, caught sight of James, and smiled, his eyes revealing a rare amusement. "I suspect we could arrange a state marriage to one of our bright young men, Pug. Do you have anyone in mind?"

"Baron James seems a most promising young man."

Arutha's smile broadened, to what James could swear was almost a grin, something he had never seen his Prince do before. "Most promising," he intoned in mock-seriousness as he returned his attention to Pug. "He stands to be a duke someday if his more impetuous nature doesn't get him killed along the way—or banished by an angry monarch to the Salt Marsh Islands. A wife might be just the thing to rein in some of that recklessness. I had given up on his ever developing an interest in family. I am pleased to be wrong. I was ten

daughter are much in agreement on this course."

Arutha sat back in his chair, a more typical half-smile on his face. "I understand. I still remember my own feelings for Anita when first we met. It can come suddenly. Very well, we'll have a state wedding as soon as he returns from his envoy to Kesh."

"Actually, I was thinking of something a bit more timely. She wishes to accompany him on his envoy."

Arutha's features darkened. "I do not think I approve. James may not have told you of the dangers—"

"I have a clear idea of the dangers involved, Arutha," Pug interrupted. "But I think you have no idea of my daughter's talents. I know much of what transpires in Kesh. She will aid your sons and envoy should trouble arise."

Arutha considered this for a moment, then nodded.

as you judge proper, then when they return, we'll have a state wedding and festival in their honor. My wife and daughter would never forgive me for letting an excuse for new gowns pass them by. We shall have to do both."

James looked surprised. "State wedding?"

Arutha nodded once, emphatically. "Gamma's a royal cousin by adoption—unless you've forgotten—all of Pug's family is. Our cousin Willy will be Duke of Stardock. You're marrying into the family." Then in mock doubt, he sighed, "Though that thought brings me only the coldest comfort."

"Thank you, Arutha," said Pug with some amusement at the banter.

"You are most welcome, Pug. And . . . Jimmy," he said, again with a genuine smile.

"Yes, Arutha," said James, returning the smile.

deep was the Prince of Krondor's love for his Princess

"I think we shall be."

"Then I have a gift for you, an early wedding present," He opened a small chest atop his writing table and withdrew a small parchment scroll. "I shall give it over when you return, but for the present—"

Pug interrupted. "I can bring it to him now, if you wish, Arutha."

If the Prince was surprised by this offer, he showed none of it. He simply said, "If you would be so kind."

Pug waved his hand, closed his eyes a moment, and the document vanished from Arutha's hand, appearing in his own. Arutha's eyes widened slightly, his only reaction to the sorcerer's ability to really move the parchment over such a distance in an instant.

Pug handed it to James. "For you."

way. You've earned the rank, James. We'll discuss holdings and revenues when you are back in Krondor. You will also assume the duties of Chancellor of the Western Realm when Cardan retires."

James grinned, and Pug and Arutha both remembered the boy thief they had met years before. "I thank His Highness."

"Now, let me return to work," said Arutha.

Pug said, "I bid you good evening, Highness."

"Good evening, to you, my lords Duke and Earl."

Pug waved his hand and the image of the Prince vanished. "Astonishing," James said. "With that trick"—he looked at the parchment he held—"and this . . . armies—"

"Which is why we must talk of things other than your wedding, James." Pug moved toward a table and indicated a decanter of wine. James poured two goblets of a fine fortified red. As he sipped. Pug sat and motioned

after I depart, with another yet to be chosen, a triumvirate of magicians who will decide the good of the people here. They may expand that council as they see fit in years to come. But Lyam will not always sit upon the Throne of Isles and I would not give over the power of Stardock to one like Mad King Rodric. I met him, and had he mustered magicians such as we have here to his cause, the world would have trembled. I also remember the havoc created by those magicians on Kelewan who chose to do the Warlord's bidding during the Riftwar. "No, Stardock must remain apolitical. Always."

James stood up and said, "As a noble of the Kingdom,

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I fear you come close to treason." He took a few steps toward an open window and looked out into the night. Then he smiled. "As a man who learned to think for himself at an early age, I applaud your wisdom."

to the Kingdom you must be an enemy?"

Pug only nodded. "Now, to other matters. We shall have a priest over from the village on the lake shore—no temples stand upon the island itself, and our relationship with those who practice clerical magic is not, shall we say, entirely cordial."

James smiled. "You poach their lands."

Pug sighed. "So many think. In any event, the only clerics I found reasonable men are either dead or distant. I'm afraid as our power here grows, so does the suspicion of the great temples in Rillanon and Kesh." Then his expression brightened. "But Father Marias who oversees the small Church of Killian in the village is a decent enough man. He'll agree to a wedding." Then Pug's face relaxed into a wide smile. "More to the point, he'll certainly agree to the feasting."

James laughed aloud, and as thought of his wedding

"I don't expect you to. If you understood what it meant, you would not be traveling to Kesh; I would persuade Arutha to keep you here. Just remember." Pug read his future son-in-law's face and said, "Go find my daughter and tell her we'll hold the ceremony day after tomorrow. No reason to wait another four days to

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next sixthday—we're breaking enough traditions as it is.

With a smile James placed the half-finished wine upon the table and left the room. As hurried footfalls echoed down the steps of the sorcerer's tower, Pug turned to look out the window and spoke softly to no one, "We could all use a dose of revelry. Too many dark days are coming."

them as proudly as any lord. Marias's eyes were almost alight with pleasure at a wedding. His flock were fisherfolk and farmers in the main, and all too often his duties consisted of burying them. Weddings and dedications of babies to the Goddess of All Living Things were especially delightful.

"Come along, children," he said as Gamina and James advanced slowly. James wore the clothing he had brought along for his presentation to the Empress, a tunic of pale blue, dark blue leggings, and black boots. Over this he wore a white surcoat sewn with gold thread. On his head he wore the latest fashion, a large beret which hung nearly down to his shoulder on his left side, a silver badge and white owl's feather setting it off.

Locklear stood beside him, similarly attired, though his clothes were even more richly fashioned in russet and gold hues. He glanced about, convinced these new fashions appeared ridiculous, but no one seemed to no-

flowers circled her brow, the traditional "bride's crown."

"Now, then," Marias said, his voice betraying the rich, almost lyrical accent of one who was born along the south coast of the Kingdom Sea, near Pointer's Head, "seeing as you've come before me with the stated intention of marriage, I've a few things to tell you." He motioned for James to take Gamina's right hand in his and he placed his own pudgy hand over theirs. "Killian, the Goddess I serve, looked down upon man and woman when they were created by Ishap, the One Above All, and saw them apart. Man and woman looked heavenward and cried out in their loneliness. Hearing them and pitying them, the Goddess of Green Silence, spoke, saying, 'You shall not abide apart.' She then created the institution of marriage as a bond to bring man and woman together. It is the melding of souls, minds, and hearts. It is when two become as one. Do you understand?" He looked each in the eye and in turn

not be, speak now or go forever in silence." If there was to be any objection, Marias didn't wait to hear it. Plunging on he said, "James and Gamina, understand that from this moment forward, each of you is now a part of the other. No longer separate, you are now as one.

"James, this woman seeks to spend her life with you. Do you take her to you as mate and wife, without reservation and knowing that she is now one with you, holding her to you, and putting away any other, from now until death?"

James nodded, as he said, "I do."

With a wave, Marias motioned for Locklear to hand James a golden ring. "Put that upon your bride's hand." James did as he was asked, placing the ring upon the ring finger of Gamina's left hand.

Marias instructed Gamina to place a ring upon James's hand, and she did so.

"In as much as James and Gamina have agreed to live as one, in the sight of gods and men, we do hereby bear witness."

The assembled company of guests repeated, "So do we bear witness."

With a grin, the ruddy-cheeked priest said, "Well, that's it, then. You're married."

James glanced around. "That's all?"

Marias laughed. "We keep it simple in the country, my lord. Now, kiss your wife, and let's get on with the feast."

James laughed, grabbed Gamina, and kissed her. The crowd cheered and hats were thrown in the air.

Glancing around to see they were not overheard, the first man said, "Earl James of Krondor. Baron Locklear. That means those two red-haired fighting lads are Arutha's sons."

The second man, stout and short, yet powerful in the shoulders, was obviously impressed at his companion's keen observation. His cherubic face appeared almost innocent as he said, "Don't see many Princes in these parts, 's true, Lafe."

"You're a fool, Reese," answered the other in a gravelly voice. "There are those who would pay well to know this. Get to the Inn of the Twelve Chairs at the

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desert's edge—they are almost certain to ride that route. You know who to ask for. Tell our Keshian friends that the Princes of Krondor and their company ride from Stardock, and travel not in state, but in stealth.

if they change route, I'll send word. They're surely carrying gold and gifts to the Empress for her birthday. With no more than twenty men at arms, we can be rich for life once the bandits cut their throats and give us our share."

Glancing around the deserted shore, the man named Reese said, "How can I get there, Lafe? The ferryman's at the wedding."

Hissing through teeth black with decay, the taller man said, "Steal a boat, stupid."

A glimmer of delight at the obvious answer shone in Reese's eyes. "Good. I'll get some food, then—"

"You'll go now!" ordered his companion, pushing him off to an uneasy trot toward the shore and the unguarded boats. "You can steal something in the town. With everyone dining here, that should be easy enough. But a few still linger, so be cautious." Reese turned and

The two Princes sat quietly at the dinner table, oblivious to the joy of the newlyweds. Each was intent on their own impatience to be on their way. James had been uncommunicative about when they were leaving, though Locklear had mentioned their stay wouldn't be extended too long, despite the unexpected events of the last two days.

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If the twins had been surprised by their mentor's sudden encounter with love, they were equally unsurprised by the hasty permission from their father and the quick wedding. Little in their lives had allowed them to take anything for granted.

The twins lived in a world of the unexpected, where the tranquillity of the moment could be shattered at

But as they had when watching their father, their present mood didn't reflect the excitement of the moment. Rather they were bored.

Borric drank deep of a simple ale and said, "Is this the best they have?"

Eriand nodded. "I expect so. From what I can see, ale isn't a major concern around here. Let us see if there's something better in the village." The brothers stood up from the bench, bowed slightly at the Baron and his new Baroness, who nodded briefly in return at the Princes' leaving the table of honor.

As they passed by the other tables set up around the square, Borric asked, "Where are you heading?"

Eriand said, "I don't know. Around. There must be some fishermen's daughters among all these people. I see a few pretty faces here and there. Every one of

they walked and agreed in silence. With the steady lectures they had been getting about responsibility,

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they felt hemmed in and controlled, and both Princes were eager for anything that resembled movement, change, and the possibility of adventure. Life was just a bit too quiet for their liking.

Chapter Five

Southward

The guards laughed.

James turned to see what caused their mirth and saw the two Princes approaching. Eriand was wearing an improbable looking coat of heavy chain, weighing at least five times what his usual leather armor weighed, a bright red cloak tossed rakishly over his shoulder. But

Kulgan or one of the Keshian magicians the robe would have seemed appropriate; on Borric the effect was entirely comic.

Locklear joined in the laughter as he came to James's side. "What are they made up for?"

James sighed. "I have no idea." To the Princes he said, "What is this, then?"

Eriand grinned. "We found a game of pokiir—here they call it poker. Our luck was . . . uneven."

James shrugged, absently wondering how long Gamina would keep him waiting. His bride was in her quarters, gathering the last of what she would bring with her to Kesh. The rest of her belongings would be sent to the palace in Krondor, in anticipation of her return there after the Empress's Birthday Jubilee.

Borric said, "I lost my own cloak to a barge-man, and

James cast a glance at the elder of the twins and saw him holding out the odd-looking staff. "All right. What is it?"

Borric took the staff out of its sheath and gave it to James to examine. "It's a magic device. The crystal glows when it gets dark, so you needn't bother with lamps or torches. We saw it work last night. It's quite good."

James nodded as if to say that was nice. "What else does it do?"

"Nothing, except it's a rather nice-looking walking stick, I think," answered Eriand. To his brother, he added, "But I wager you'll wish you had your sword back if someone comes running at you with a bloody great falchion in his hand."

"I expect," agreed Locklear.

Grinning, Borric pulled up the hem of his robe, and James shook his head in astonishment. Borric wore boots of red leather, rising to mid-calf, each adorned with a yellow eagle. "I won these as well."

"I think the previous owner was pleased to see the losing hand when those were wagered," James said. "You look like you're about to open a traveling carnival. Hide those, if you please. The colors are beyond belief," he added, indicating the clash between the red and yellow boots, and the purple robe. To Eriand he added, "And you look like you're about to invade Kesh single-handed. I haven't seen chain like that since the battle of Sethanon."

Locklear who, like James, wore a simple tunic and a leather vest, said, "You're going to love that chain when we reach the edge of the desert."

Eriand's retort was interrupted by the appearance of

James could not know. But it was clear to anyone with eyes that Katala's life was numbered now in weeks at the most.

They came to where James waited, and Katala spoke to her son-in-law in quiet tones. "This is good-bye, James."

James could only nod. Katala's people were warriors and proud and always direct. So Pug had impressed on him and so she behaved. "You will be missed," he said at last.

"As I will miss all of you." She placed her hand on his chest, gently, and he could feel the frail fingers touching him lightly over his heart. "We only pass on from view. We live here as long as we are remembered."

James lowered his head and kissed her lightly upon the cheek, a gesture of both affection and respect. "Always remembered," he said.

linger, she might not have the strength to make the journey from the site of the rift on Kelewan to the Thuril border. I have friends who will help, but it will still be an arduous trip for someone in her condition to make alone."

James's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You're not traveling with her?"

Pug just shook his head. "I must be about other business."

James sighed. "Will we see you . . .?" He had been about to say soon, but something in Pug's expression caused him to let the sentence fall off.

Pug glanced over his shoulder at his wife and daughter,

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who stood holding hands silently. Both Pug and

the Dark Path, marched under the banner of their false prophet, Murmandamus. But that time was forever etched in stark relief in his memory. He still recalled the battles of Armengar and Sethanon in detail and could vividly recall the sight of the sky torn open by the return of the Dragon Lords, and the nearly catastrophic end of life their return heralded. The seemingly miraculous victory over them, directed by Pug, Tomas of Elvandar, Macros the Black, and Arutha was still something he could not fully comprehend. Finally James said, "That would be when you were the most needed, though."

Pug shrugged, as if to say that wasn't necessarily true. "In any event, I am now dependent upon others to carry forth the work begun under my guidance. You must help."

"What can I do?"

With a faint smile. Pug said, "The first should be no

guard in a few years."

Pug shrugged again, showing only a small hint of his disappointment that his son was not here to follow after him. Whatever difficulty that had passed between Pug and his son was not discussed. "Secondly, I need your voice in support of Stardock's autonomy."

"Agreed."

"And remember what I told you when you need to speak on my behalf, the secret I shared with you."

James tried to find humor in the sad departure, but

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could only say, "As you wish. I will remember. Though standing upon an island where men work spells of great art every day makes me wonder at what nonsense I'm to remember."

them across the lake, James glanced over at the Princes.

Borric and Eriand stood chatting about the coming trip, obviously relieved to be away from what they judged unwelcome tranquillity, and for a brief moment James wondered if they might not all regret having no more such tranquillity.

Light gusts blew stinging sand, and the twins reined in their horses. Gamina studied the horizon and spoke loudly enough for all to hear. "I don't think it's a serious storm. The sky looks wrong. But it may be bothersome." They rode at the edge of the Jal-Pur, along the road to Nar Ayab, the northernmost city of consequence in the Empire. The rough plateau landscape was almost as desolate as the desert itself, with few trees and bushes, and most of those thickly bunched along the banks of the few small streams that coursed down out of the hills below the mountains called the Pillars of the Stars by the Keshians.

raised two small standards just as the Keshian riders breasted the hill upon which James and his companions waited. Two Royal Krondorian House flags, each with a different cadence mark overlaid, Borric and Eriand's

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royal standards, now greeted the suspicious eye of the advancing Keshian leader.

A dark-skinned man, his knappy beard matted with grey dust, motioned his own company to halt. They were a rough-looking band. Each man had a bow slung over the saddle horn as well as a round hide shield with a metal bosk; each rider wore a curved scimitar at his belt and carried a light lance. All wore heavy trousers tucked into high boots, white linen shirts, leather vests, and metal helms with long linen head coverings hanging over their necks. Borric motioned to Eriand.

"Clever, isn't it? They keep the sun off their necks and can hook the cloth over their faces if the wind gets

the ragged-looking company, unconvinced that such dirty, tired looking travelers would indeed be a royal caravan from Isles. At ^ast he saluted no one in particular, a lazy gesture of bringing his right hand to his head, palm out, then let his hand fall to his horse's neck. "Welcome, my lords . . . and lady."

James moved to the fore. "I am James, Earl of Krondor, and I have the honor of presenting Their Royal Highnesses, Princes Borric and Eriand."

The two Princes inclined their heads slightly, and the Keshian patrol leader bowed his head slightly in return. "I am Sergeant Ras-al-Fawi, my lord. What conspires to bring your august company to such a miserable place?"

"We are traveling to the City of Kesh for the Empress's Jubilee."

The sergeant shrugged, indicating that the ways of

shy. James raised his voice over the noise, "It seemed better to move quickly and with stealth than slowly, Sergeant. The storm rises. May we continue?"

The Captain signed his own men forward as he said, "Of course, my lord. I and my men are traveling to the Inn of the Twelve Chairs, to wait out the storm in comfort. I suggest you join us."

"Is it dangerous?"

The Sergeant glanced at the horizon as Gamina had and said, "Who can say? Dust storms that rise in the Jal-Pur may blow quickly or long. If I was a betting man, I would wager this one will be little more than an inconvenience. Still, I would rather be conveniently inside."

"We'll continue," said James. "We stayed longer at our last rest than planned, and it wouldn't do to arrive late to the Jubilee."

the Kingdom party resumed its journey. James signaled and his small band started down the hard-packed dirt that passed for an Imperial road in the northern frontier.

As they rode past the silent Keshians, Borric nodded to Eriand, who had also been studying the tired, dirty soldiers. Each man looked a seasoned fighter, with not one youthful face in the company. To his brother, Eriand said, "They keep their veterans along our borders."

Jimmy, overhearing, said loudly enough for the entire company to hear, "They have veterans to spare in Kesh. A man who retires in their army has spent twenty years and more putting down revolts and fighting civil wars. They keep but a tenth part of their army near our borders."

Borric said, "Then why do they fear us?"

Eriand laughed. "Still, it's better than having nothing to do."

James glanced at Locklear. Both had seen more than their share of war before they were the twins' age. Both disagreed with Eriand's sentiments.

"Riders!"

The soldier pointed to the far horizon, where the wind blew up a dark wall of swirling sand that raced toward the travelers. And within the dusty murk, the shape of approaching riders could be seen. Then, as if the soldier's warning had been a signal, the riders spread out and galloped their horses.

"Gamina! Get to the rear," James shouted, as he drew his sword. The soldiers were but a moment behind in releasing the pack animals and bringing their own weapons to the ready.

could manage, Borric leaped from his horse and took two in hand.

The sounds of steel upon steel caused Borric to pull the horses around, back to the wind, in time to see the first bandits intercepted by his own soldiers. In the fray, he sought out sight of Eriand, but the milling horses and swirling dust made it impossible.

Then a horse screamed and a rider went down cursing loudly. A clash of sword upon shield and a grunt of effort were followed by a succession of shouts made almost incoherent by the rising shriek of the wind. The bandits had timed the raid with perfection, picking the moment when the travelers would be most vulnerable to the onslaught, almost blinded by the sandstorm. In

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the time it had taken to react and draw weapons, the bandits had already succeeded in throwing the men of

In the biting sand, Borric fought to control horses terrorized by the sounds of wind and battle and the smell of blood. He could only use his weight to slow their pulling, shouting "Whoa!" repeatedly. A pair of war-trained, riderless horses heard his shouts and halted their trot away from the battle, but the pack animals were ready to bolt.

Borric was suddenly pulled off-balance and released his grip on the lead ropes. He hit the ground and rolled, coming to his feet. He thought of Gamina and wondered if she was in any danger from the spooked horses. He looked about, but all he could see were riders locked in combat. He called her name. In his mind he heard her answer, 7 am fine. Borne. See to yourself. I will attempt to keep the pack animals in sight.

Attempting to "think" back at her, he yelled, "Be alert for raiders! They'll seek the pack animals!" He glanced about, hoping to find a dropped weapon, but

As the guard was intercepted by the first rider, Borric braced himself, then jumped at the horse's bridle, causing the mount to stumble and throw his rider. The horse's chest struck the Prince, the impact sending Borric flying back, landing upon the ground with a heavy thud. Quickly he was on his feet, poised for the attack he knew was coming. The raider had also come up

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ready for a fight, but had the advantage of his weapon. Borric pulled the glowing staff from his belt and attempted to use it to defend himself. The bandit swung wildly, and Borric slipped the blow, moving inside the man's guard. He drove the head of the staff into the pit of the man's stomach, generating a satisfying explosion of breath as the bandit went down; the wind knocked out of him. Borric then broke the staff over the man's

pening, but all that was visible were milling, cursing shadows in sandy gloom. Then he felt more than heard something behind him. He ducked to one side as a blow intended to crack his skull glanced off the side of his head. Falling heavily, he attempted to roll away from the rider who had taken him by surprise from the rear. He rose to his knees and was almost to his feet, when the chest of a horse struck him, as the rider used his mount as a weapon. Stunned as he lay upon the ground, the Prince barely understood what he saw as the rider leaped from his mount and came to stand over him. Through dust and his own muddled senses, the Prince watched with some detachment as the man drew back a boot and kicked him in the head.

James spun his horse and moved to intercept a bandit heading toward the packhorses. Two soldiers were down by his count, and Locklear was engaged in a running fight with a raider. The raider veered off, and for an instant James was in an island of relative calm in the midst of the struggle. He glanced about, trying to dis-

search for Borric, James spurred his horse and headed toward the gathering band of Islemen. Quickly commands were given and obeyed, and where moments before a milling band of surprised guards had been fleeing, now a trained unit of the finest horsemen the Kingdom had in service sat ready to receive the next attack by the bandits.

Then the raiders were upon them and the battle was joined in full. Furious cries and screams of pain cut through the constant howl of wind and the sting of sand. James felt the giddy mix of elation and fear, a sensation he hadn't experienced since the Battle of Sethanon. He struck out at a raider, driving the man back as the severity of the storm increased. Then the storm overcame the battle and all was whirling dust and noise. Each man knew he now had a blind spot, for to look into the storm was impossible. Men vainly attempted to cover their faces with cloths and sleeves, but the only relief was to turn away from the storm. After an instant of screaming

Then there was only the storm and the fighting was forgotten. The gusts were literally blinding, for to turn one's face to the shrieking sands was to risk losing sight. Covering his face, James turned himself and his mount away from the wind, conscious of his unprotected back, but there was nothing else to do. He was given at least partial comfort by the knowledge the raiders were as blind as he.

Again the winds lessened, and James spun his mount to face any possible attacker. But like phantoms of dream, the raiders were gone into the storm.

James glanced about and could only see men of Isles. Locklear gave orders and the company dismounted, each man gripping his horse's reins firmly as the intensity of the storm alternately increased and diminished.

Locklear pointed to the rear. "She was with the baggage animals. Borric was seeing after her."

Then Gamina's voice sounded in James's mind. I'm here, beloved. I am unhurt. But Borric and another guard were carried off by the raiders.

James shouted, "Gamina says that Prince Borric and a guard were carried off!"

Locklear swore. "There's nothing we can do but wait for this storm to blow out."

James tried to look into the dusty murk and could see barely ten feet away. All they could do was wait.

Borric groaned and a rough toe jammed into his ribs brought him to consciousness. Above him, the wind still shrieked as the sandstorm blew itself to full fury, but the sheltered gully where the raiders hid was relatively quiet. He levered himself up on one elbow and found

The man squatted before Borric. He was thin, wore his beard cut close so that it looked little more than stubble. His head was covered in a turban that once may have looked fine but now looked only faded and lice ridden. He wore simple trousers and tunic and high boots. Over his shoulder stood another man, wearing an unadorned leather vest over his bare chest. His head was shaved, save a single lock of hair down the middle, and a large gold ring hung in his left ear. Borric recognized these as the trademarks of the Guild of Slavers, from Durbin.

The first man nodded at Borric, then looked at the guard with the bloody face and shook his head in the

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negative. The slaver pulled Borric roughly to his feet without a word, while the thin man took out a dagger and before Borric realized his intent, cut the unconscious guard's throat.

nodded weakly. The slaver pulled him along through the small gully where a group of horsemen were ransacking a bundle of baggage. One of the men swore quietly. The slaver's companion passed where Borric stood and grabbed the man. "What did you find?" he asked, speaking the patois of the desert, a mingling of Keshian, King's Tongue, and the language of the desertmen of the Jal-Pur.

"Women's clothing and some dried meat and cakes. Where is the gold we were promised?"

The thin man, obviously the leader, swore as well. "I'll kill that Lafe. He said nobles brought gold to the Empress."

The slaver shook his head, as if he had expected this sort of disappointment. "You should know better than to trust fools." He glanced up at where the wind shrieked overhead and said, "The storm passes. We're only yards away from this one's companions." He in-

again, Luten. They will be ready this time. And I see nothing to make me think we'll find gold or jewelry with this band."

The man called Luten glanced around, a near-feral light in his eyes. "These are armed soldiers." He closed his eyes a moment as if about to cry, then opened them

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and clenched his teeth. Borric recognized a man with a violent temper, who ruled his company through intimidation and threats as much as through any natural leadership. "Ah!" he exclaimed. Nodding at Borric, he said, "Kill him and let us flee."

Kasim moved Borric behind him, as if protecting him, and said, "Our agreement was I would have the prisoners for slaves. Otherwise my men would not have

but I will have this man for the auction. He is my profit in Durbin. My guild would not look kindly upon returning without at least this small profit."

Whirling to face Borric, the man called Luten said, "You. Where is the gold?"

Feigning ignorance, Borric said, "Gold?"
Luten stepped forward and struck the Prince across

the face. "The gold some nobles brought to the Empress's Jubilee."

Borric extemporized. "Nobles? There was a party of nobles we passed along the way. Two, three noblemen with guards, heading for ... an inn. The Inn of the Twelve Chairs, I think. We . . . hurried because . . . the hide trader was anxious to get his hides to the tanner before they turned rotten."

Luten turned and shrieked his fury into the wind.

now on Luten's feet. He had been thoroughly searched while unconscious, it seemed. Luten shoved Kasim aside, coming to face Borric directly. "I'll have the truth out of him, as well." He drew back the dagger, as if to

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thrust at Borric, then stiffened. A sad, almost apologetic expression crossed his face for an instant, then he fell to

his knees.

Behind him Kasim withdrew the dagger he had just stabbed into Luten's back. Kasim then grabbed Luten by the hair and said, "Never threaten me, you stupid man." Then with a quick jerk he pulled back Luten's head and sliced his neck, sending a fountain of blood spurting off to one side. "And never turn your back on me." Luten's eyes turned up in his head and Kasim released him, letting him fall at Borric's feet. "Let this be a lesson to you in your next life."

Turning to face Borric, the slaver said, "Show me no trouble, and you'll live. Trouble me, and you'll die. Understand?"

Borric nodded. To the others, Kasim said, "Get ready to leave now." He then jumped up to the edge of the gully, ignoring the howling wind. The powerful slaver put shoulder to one of the larger boulders and shoved it over, starting a small landslide which covered the two bodies. He leaped nimbly down into the depression, and glanced about as if anticipating trouble from one of Luten's men. When no one offered him any difficulty, he rose to his full height. "To the oasis at Broken Palms."

"What are your skills?" The slaver stood above Borric, whose wits were slowly returning to him. He had been dragged to a horse and forced to ride with his hands manacled. The pounding he had taken had added to the disorientation he had felt since his capture. He vaguely

years gone by.

Borric shook his head to clear it and answered back in the formal court language of Kesh, "What skills?"

The slaver took his answer as a sign of confusion from the head blow. "What tricks? What magics do you do?"

Borric understood. The slaver judged him a magician from Stardock, which accounted for the magic blanking chains. For an instant, Borric felt an impulse to explain who he was, but thoughts of his father receiving ransom demands on his behalf kept him from answering quickly. He could come forth at anytime between now and the slave auction at Durbin, and perhaps between now and then he could conspire to escape.

Suddenly the man lashed out and struck the Prince a back-handed blow. "I've no time to be gentle with you, mage. Your party is but a few hours away and no doubt will be looking for you. Or even if they have no love of

Kasim looked over his shoulder and said, "I lead this band, now, I'll decide who we kill and who we take to market."

Borric said, "I'm no magician. I won the robes in a game of poker."

The second man ran a hand over his dark-bearded face. "He lies. It's some magician's trick to get free of

the manacles and kill us all with his magic. I say kill him

now—"

now

"And I say if you don't shut up and quit arguing, there'll be another worthless carcass for the vultures to feast on. Get the men ready. As soon as the horses have been watered and rested, I want to put as much distance as I can between those guards and us." To Borric

With an inarticulate grunt, the raider moved away, signaling the others to ready for riding.

Borric managed to sit upright against a large boulder.

"I'm no magician."

"Well, you're no fighting man, either. To travel unarmed at the edge of the Jal-Pur, one must either have a great company of guards or a great deal of faith. Faith is for priests, which you're not. You don't look the fool, but then I've never been one for casual appearances." Shifting from Keshian to the King's Tongue, he said, "Where are you from?"

"Krondor"—Borric decided through his aching head he would be best served by obscuring his identity—"but

I've traveled a lot."

The slaver sat back on his haunches, arms resting on

houses—"

"Enough!" interrupted Kasim. "You've convinced me. A tutor, then, is it? Well, there are rich men who need educated slaves to teach their children." Without waiting for any response from Borric, he stood up. As he stepped away, he said, "You are worthless to me dead, teacher, but I am also not a patient man. Do not be too much trouble and you will live. Cause me difficulty, and I'll kill you as soon as spit on you." To his band he said, "Mount up! We ride to Durbin!"

Chapter Six

Dilemma

Eriand turned his horse.

"Borric!" he shouted over the still-howling wind.
James and the guards watched from where they stood

er's name. "Borric!"

Gamina stood beside her husband and said, "It's difficult to concentrate with this wind screaming in my ears, but there are thoughts coming from that direction." She covered her face with her forearm, turned, and pointed to the west.

"Borric?" asked Locldear, who stood next to James, his back to the biting wind.

Gamina field up her arm, letting the sleeve of her gown shield her face. "No. I'm sorry. I don't know these men, but none of the minds I've touched is his. When I attempt to focus on what I remember of his thoughts during the battle ..."

"Nothing," James finished.

"Could he be unconscious?" Locklear's expression was hopeful.

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ness in her voice, she said, "I can't sense Borric anywhere."

James reached out to her and she came into the comfort of his arm. His horse nickered at the change in pressure on the reins and James gave an impatient yank on the leathers, silencing the animal. Softly, so that only Gamina would hear, he said, "I pray the gods let him be alive."

For an hour the wind blew, and Eriand circled his companions to the limit of his ability to see them, while he cried his brother's name. Then the winds ceased, and in the silence that followed, his hoarse cries rang

main here with Edand and search the immediate area, but don't wander too far. I'll take two men and ride to the Inn of the Twelve Chairs and see if that Keshian patrol can help us locate Borric." With a glance around the barren landscape, he added, "I'm certain I have no

idea where to begin looking."

For the next few hours, through the early afternoon, it took all of Locklear's powers of persuasion, with some not-so-idle threatening, to keep Eriand from riding farther into the wastes than Locklear judged safe. The young Prince was frantic to search for his brother, in case he was lying unconscious a few yards away, in a gully or ravine, in need of care. Locklear spread the men out to patrol the surrounding area, always keeping a chain of guards posted so that someone was always in sight of the impromptu camp. Gamina tended the wounded, getting them ready to ride to the closest shelter when James returned.

He wished to put as much distance between himself and these cursed Islemen as possible, but the possibility of an international incident between the Empire and her largest neighbor gave sufficient reason to put his irritation aside and help in the search for the lost Prince.

Experienced trackers quickly discovered the gully wherein the raiders had hidden. Shouts brought the entire company to the edge of a gully, where two scouts were inspecting a large rock fall. One continued poking about in the rubble while the second scout carried a single boot up to where the Islemen waited. There was no mistaking the scarlet and yellow design of the boot. Pointing back down at the mass of boulders he said, "M'lord, I found this. A little farther in, under the rocks, I can see what's left of the foot that wore it."

Eriand sat in silent shock as James asked, "Can we dig him out?"

Eriand said, "I want him dug out."

James said, "I understand—"

Eriand interrupted. "No, you don't. That may not be Borric down there."

Locklear attempted to be understanding. "I know how you must feel—"

"No," said Eriand, "you don't know." To James he said, "We don't know that's Borric down there. He could have lost the boot during the struggle. He could be a prisoner. We don't know if that's him under the rocks."

James said, "Gamina, is there any sign of Borric?"

Gamina just shook her head. "The thoughts I de-

were dead ... I'd feel something." Looking across the broken landscape of the high desert he said, "He's out there somewhere. And I intend to find him."

"And what are you going to do, m'lord?" asked the Keshian Sergeant. "Ride out into the plateau country alone and without water or food? It doesn't look it, but it's as much a desert here as in the great sand ergs of the Jal-Pur. Beyond that rise of ridges over there the true sandy wastes begin, and if you don't know where the Oasis of the Broken Palms is, you'll not live long enough to find the Oasis of the Hungry Goats. There are thirty or so places out there you can find water and a few with food-bearing plants as well, but you can walk within yards of several and not know them. You would die, young lord."

Turning his horse back toward the way they had come, Sergeant Ras-al-Fawi said, "My lords, I grieve for your loss, but my duty dictates I ride on and discover others bent upon breaking the Empire's peace. I shall

the heart of the Empire. Send word ahead of your arrival and a state welcome will be mounted by the Governor of Nar Ayab. From there, he will send mounted soldiers to protect you until you reach the city of Kesh." He left unsaid that had this been done from the start, the bandits would never have been able to surprise the Islemen. "In time, the Empress, blessings be upon her, will order engineers out to retrieve your young Prince, and he will be returned home for a fitting burial. Until

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then, I can only wish you the gods' favor in your travels."

With a wave and heels to the side of the horse, the Sergeant and his patrol headed away from the gully. James skirted the top of the fall and looked down to the lone Keshian scout who remained. "What do you see?"

The scout considered the signs, "Many men, milling

spot. I would guess a throat was cut." He pointed to two lines of faint scratches in the dust leading from the bloodstain to the rockfall. "Two heels as someone was dragged to where the rocks were pushed." He pointed again to the top of the gully. "One climbed there." He glanced about once more, then scampered up the incline to where his horse waited. "They move south, to the Oasis of the Broken Palms."

Locklear said, "How do you know?"

The guard smiled. "It is the only place they can go, m'lord, for they move into the desert, and without baggage horses they cannot carry enough water to see them through to Durbin."

"Durbin!" Eriand almost spat the word. "That rat hole. Why would they risk the dangers of the desert to go there?"

"Because," James answered, "it is a safe harbor for

Eriand said, "I don't follow."

James turned his horse toward the direction the scout had indicated and said, "If only two guards—" quickly he added, "or Borric and one guard remain alive,

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there's enough profit at the Durbin slave auction to make the raid profitable. If they are taken into the Empire, the money is less than a third what it is in Durbin, and then the leader has an angry crew to govern, and that can be dangerous." James spoke with authority.

Eriand said, "Then why wouldn't Borric just tell them who he is? He's certainly worth more in ransom than he'd ever fetch as a slave."

James looked out thoughtfully across the wastelands

The Keshian scout ventured, "These raiders may not be as clever as you, m'lord. Your Prince, should he live, may feel it dangerous to tell them who he is. They might cut this throat to avoid trouble and flee into the wastes. He may be unconscious, yet not injured enough for them to abandon. There may be other answers, m'lord."

Eriand said, "Then we must hurry."

The scout said, "We must proceed cautiously to avoid ambush. Highness." He pointed into the sandy landscape. "If slavers attack the road, then out there at an oasis or in one of the wadis a slave caravan gathers. Many raiders with many guards will bring their catch to be taken to Durbin—many more fighters than we could face, even had my Sergeant remained—more than both our companies could face. Perhaps a hundred guards."

Feeling the heavy weight of despair begin to descend upon him, Eriand said, "We'll find him. He isn't dead."

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recuperate until they were ready to return to the Kingdom. He did a swift calculation and realized he now had only a dozen healthy soldiers. Feeling vulnerable and somewhat foolish, he ordered that small band into the desert.

The sun was touching the horizon when the scout rode at a gallop toward the Islemen. James signaled a halt. Reining in his mount, the scout said, "In the Wadi al Safra, a caravan gathers—one hundred guards, maybe more."

James swore. Eriand said, "Any sign of my brother?"

"I could not get close enough to tell, my Prince."

"Is there any place nearby where we could get close to the camp?" asked Locklear.

Eriand began to dismount, but James said, "No, you'll clank like an armorer's wagon in that chain. Wait here."

Gamina said, "I should go, James. I can tell if Borric's in the caravan if I can get close enough."

"How close is close enough?" asked her new husband.

"A stone's throw," answered Gamina.

James asked the scout, "Can we get that close?"

The scout said, "We shall be close enough to see if any of the pigs have boils upon their faces, m'lord."

"Good," said Gamina, picking up the hem of her riding gown so it stayed clear of the ground. She tucked it in her wide leather belt, in the fashion of the Stardock fisherwomen when they waded into the shallows.

ability as men, he mused to himself as he dismounted.

You can't contrive reasons to keep them safe.

Locklear signaled a pair of guards to accompany James, Gamina, and the scout and the five set out down the trail on foot. They moved slowly, as the sun fell below the western horizon. By the time they approached the near end of the ravine, the sky was slate grey and the desert was alive with highlights of crimson and pink as the reflected sunlight off the clouds over the distant sea bathed the landscape in rose twilight.

Noise from the caravan echoed through the deepening gloom and James glanced around to see if everyone had stayed close. Gamina touched his arm lightly and her thoughts came to him. I can sense many minds in the wadi, my love.

BorricP he asked silently.

Nothing, she admitted. But I must get closer to be

a likely place to dump offal and garbage and there may be guards nearby."

James nodded and the scout led them into the gloom.

James could remember several times in his past when he had taken short journeys that seemed to take forever, but none seemed to take so long as it took to travel the short distance to the end of the gully. As they reached it, the voices of the guards could be heard in soft conversation as they walked easily along the perimeter of the camp. Not only was the journey nerve-racking for the danger, but the end of the gully was being used as a garbage dump and privy trench; the Islemen had to creep through garbage and waste, both human and horse.

James stepped in something wet and soft and from the odor which hung in the ravine like a noisome fog he was certain he didn't want to know what it was. He

them for warmth were at least thirty miserable-looking people, but nowhere in the group could James see Borric. Not every face could be seen, but James was certain his red hair would be easily noticeable in the sea of dark heads, despite the flickering firelight.

Then a man in a purple robe approached the two guards and for a moment, James's chest constricted. But it wasn't Borric. The wearer of the robe had the hood tossed back and the darkly bearded face that scowled at the two guards was one James had never seen before. He wore a sword at his hip, and ordered the two men to cease their chatter and move on.

The robed man turned as another joined him, a large man in a leather vest, wearing the caste mark of the Durbin slavers on his arm. It was a mark James hadn't seen since he was a boy, but like all members of the Mockers, Krondor's Guild of Thieves, he knew it by reputation. The Durbin slavers were not men to trouble lightly.

Are you certain? he asked.

Sadly, she said. If he were in that camp, as close as we are, I would find him. Even were he sleeping, I could sense his presence were he in that camp. She silently sighed and he caught the echoes of sorrow in her mind. There can be no explanation for it save he lay buried beneath the rubble back where we found the boot. There was a moment of silence, then she said. He is dead.

James was motionless for an instant, then he mo-

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tioned to the scout. By sign he gave the order to return the way they had come. The search was over.

"No!" Eriand's face was harsh as he refused to accept

took the boots from him as well, I grant that. But there was no sign of him in the camp." To the Keshian scout he said, "Is there any chance the bandits who raided us were not part of this slaver caravan?"

The scout shrugged, as if to say anything was possible. "Probably not, my lord. By carrying off some of your men it is unlikely it was but a coincidence you were raided. Any of your men who remain alive are for certain in that camp."

James nodded. "If he had been alive, Eriand, Gamina would have been able to speak to him."

"How can you be so certain?"

So that all in the camp could hear her, Gamina said, I have control over my talents, Eriand. I can choose how many or few I wish to speak to, and once I touch a mind I can recognize its thoughts. Borric's thoughts were not among those in the camp.

The scout said, "My lord, if I may remain with you this night, I shall have to move on to find my Sergeant. He will wish to know of these Durbinites. The Governor of Durbin is little better than a pirate and renegade himself, and sooner or later, word of this outrage will reach the Court of Light. When the Empress, blessings be upon her, at last decides to act, retribution shall be forthcoming, and it shall be terrible indeed. I know it can not ease your burden, but to assault the person of a

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royal family enroute to her Jubilee is beyond insult. The Empress, blessings upon her name, will no doubt take it as a personal insult and act to revenge your family."

Eriand's anger was not soothed in the least. "What? The Governor of Durbin reprimanded? Then a formal letter of apology, I suppose."

"More likely she will order the city surrounded and

tude of the guard as he recounted such power on the part of one woman, conspired to render him without wit. He just nodded dumbly.

James, seeking to turn talk away from the terrible diplomatic situation that would arise out of Borric's death, said, "We shall ask you to bear letters to be forwarded back to the Prince of Krondor, so that we may mitigate any difficulties between our two nations."

The scout nodded. "As one who serves along the border, I would do so gladly, m'lord." He then left to see to his horse. James nodded at Locklear, who in turn motioned with his head toward Eriand. Both young nobles moved away to speak in private.

Locklear said, "This is a fine mess."

"Well, we have faced difficulties in the past. This is what we were trained for, to make choices."

Locklear pointed out. "We would be there before it's over."

"I still would rather have us there at the beginning."

He glanced around at the black night. "Out there something's going on. I can't help feeling that." He put a

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finger on Locklear's chest. "It's just too much a coincidence that we were the ones raided."

"Perhaps," agreed Locky in part, "but if we were the target for a raid, then those behind it were those who attempted to assassinate Borric in Krondor."

"Whoever they are." James was silent for a long moment, then said, "It makes no sense. Why would they wish to kill the boy?"

"To start a war between our Kingdom and the Em-

that is our likely culprit."

James nodded. "We will not be able to do that in Krondor."

Turning to find Eriand alone, facing out into the desert night, James crossed to stand beside him. In quiet tones he said, "You must come to terms with this, Eriand. Your grief must quickly be abandoned and you must accept the change in circumstances fate has forced upon you."

Eriand blinked in confusion, as one suddenly thrust into the light. "What?"

James turned and stood before him. With firm hand upon the younger man's shoulder, he said, "You are now Heir. You will be our next King. And you will carry the fate of your homeland with you when we ride to Kesh."

Eriand seemed not to hear him. The Prince said noth-

Borric awoke.

He lay motionless, straining to hear through the confusion of voices and sounds that were ever-present in the camp, even at night. For an instant, while still half-dozing, he had thought he heard his name being faintly called.

Sitting up, he blinked as he looked around. Most of the captives still sat huddled near the campfire, as if its light and warmth would somehow banish the cold fear in their souls. He had chosen to lay as far from the stench of the waste trench as possible, on the opposite side of the band of slaves. As Borric moved, he was again reacquainted with the manacles that bound his wrists, the odd-looking flat silver metal with the reputed property of blanking out all magic powers of whoever was forced to wear them. Borric shivered, and realized the desert night was indeed turning cold. His robe had been taken from him and his shirt as well, leaving him

tempted to ignore his intrusion. Each lived moment to moment in his own world of misery.

A scream cut through the night as one of the five women captives was again assaulted by the guards. Earlier a sixth woman had struggled too much, biting out the neck artery of the guard who was raping her, earning both of them death, his the swifter and less painful.

From the sound of the pitiful wail that trailed on after

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the scream, Borric considered her the lucky one. He doubted any of the women would be alive by the time they reached Durbin. By turning them over to the guards, the slaver avoided problems for many days to come. Should any survive the trip, she would be sold cheaply as a kitchen drudge. None was young enough nor attractive enough that it was worth the slave master's trouble to keep them out of the guards' reach.

As he moved away from the closely guarded slaves, another man called his name and approached. The man's name was Salaya, and he wore the purple robe Borric had won two nights before in Stardock. When Borric had first come to camp in the dawn hours that morning, the man had demanded the robe at once and had beaten the Prince when he appeared slow to remove it. The fact Borric was wearing manacles at the time seemed to make no difference. After the Prince had been struck repeatedly, Kasim had intervened, pointing out the obvious. Salaya was hardly mollified as Borric had one wrist, then the other, freed while he removed the robe. He seemed to blame Borric for that embarrassment before the others his own impatience had caused, as if it had been the Prince's fault somehow that Salaya was a stupid pig. Borric had marked him for death as well. Kasim gave some instructions to Salaya, who seemed to listen with a surly half-attention. Then the slaver was gone, heading off toward the string of horses. Most likely, thought Borric, he's off to supervise

when riding, so it was locked away in his baggage, among those packs the bandits did not conspire to capture. While red hair might make them pause to consider the probability of his claim, it was in no way unique among those who lived in Krondor. Blond hair might be the norm for fair-skinned people living in Yabon and along the Far Coast, but Kro'ndorians numbered as many redheads as blonds among their citizenry. And proving he was not a magician would take some doing, for what difference was there between someone who doesn't know any magic and someone who knows magic but pretends he doesn't.

Borric was decided. He would wait until he reached Durbin then seek to find someone a little more likely to understand his circumstance. He really doubted Kasim or any of his men—especially if they all were as bright as Salaya—would either understand or believe him. But someone with the intelligence to be the master of such

sensation of the ground spinning beneath made him nauseous. Then it passed. Soon a fitful sleep descended.

The sun burned like the angry presence of Prandur, the Fire God, himself. As if hanging only a few yards above him, the sun beat down on Borric's fair skin, searing it. While Borric's hands and face had been lightly tanned when serving at the northern borders, the scorching desert sun burned him to weakness. Blisters had erupted along Borric's back the second day, and his head swam from the pain of his burn. The first two days had been bad enough, as the caravan had moved from the rocky plateau country down into the sandy wastes the local desert men called the ergs of the Jal-Pur. The five wagons moved slowly over what was

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less dirt than hard-packed sand baked to brick finish by the same sun that was slowly killing the slaves.

guards halted to rest, and then with the evening meal—the only meal, Borric corrected himself. It was a dried mush bread, with little flavor and little that gave strength. He hoped the soft things in the bread were indeed raisins; he had not bothered to look. Food kept him alive, no matter how distasteful it might be.

The slaves were a sullen group, each man lost in his own suffering. Weakened by the heat, few had anything to say to each other; talk was a needless waste of energy. But Borric had managed to glean a few facts from one or two of them. The guards were less vigilant now that the caravan was into the wastes; even should a slave escape, where would he go? The desert was the surest guard of all. Once in Durbin, they would rest for a few days, perhaps as long as a week, so bloody feet and burned skins could heal, and weight could be regained before they were offered upon the block. Travel-weary slaves brought little gold.

Borric attempted to consider his choices, but the heat

were ordered to sit near the campfire as they had been for the last three nights and listened to the guards having sport with the five remaining women captives. They no longer struggled or screamed. Borric ate his flat piece of bread and sipped his water. The first night after

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entering the desert, one man had gulped his water, then vomited it a few minutes later. The guards would give him no more. He had died the next day. Borric had learned his lesson. No matter how much he wished to tilt back his head and drain the copper cup, he lingered over the stale, warm water, sipping it slowly. Sleep came quickly, the deep dreamless sleep of exhaustion, with no real rest obtained. Each time he moved, angry sunburns brought him awake. If he faced away from the fire, his back smarted at any touch of heat, yet if he

seemed nothing so much as a lens for the sun, bringing the searing touch of Prandur to torment the slaves. Before an hour was passed, two more men were fallen, left where they hit the sand.

Borric's mind retreated into itself. An animal consciousness was all that remained, a cunning, vicious animal that refused to die. Every iota of energy he possessed was given over to but one task, to move forward and not to fall. To fall was to die.

Then after a time of mindless moving forward, hands seized him. "Stop," commanded a voice.

Borric blinked and through flashing yellow lights, he saw a face. It was a face composed of knots and lumps, angles and planes, skin dark like ebony over a curly beard. It was the ugliest face Borric had ever beheld. It was magnificent in its repulsiveness.

Borric began to giggle, but all that came from his

through Borric's hair, cooling his baking head slightly. "Too many have fallen along the way; Kasim will not be pleased." Quickly he poured a mouthful for the young Prince, then moved on, as if nothing had passed between them.

Then another guard brought around the water skin and cups and the clamor for water began. Each slave who could still speak announced his thirst, as if to remain silent was to chance being ignored.

Borric could barely move, and each motion brought waves of bright yellow and white light and red flashes behind his eyes. Yet, almost blindly, he pushed out his hand to take the metal cup. The water was warm and bitter, yet sweeter than the finest Natalese wine to Borric's parched lips. He sipped the wine, forcing himself to hold it in his mouth as his father had taught him, letting the dark purple fluid course around his tongue,

good wine. He would have to see if Papa was testing him and Eriand by putting a poor local wine on the table, to see if they were paying attention.

Borric blinked and through eyes gummy from heat and dryness, he couldn't see where the tip was. How was he to spit the wine if there was no tip bucket to spit into? He mustn't drink it, or he would be very drunk, as he was only a small boy. Perhaps if he turned his head and spit behind the table, no one would notice.

"Hey!" shouted a voice. "That slave is spitting out his water!"

Hands ripped the cup from Borric's hands and he fell over backwards. He lay on the floor of his father's dining hall and wondered why the stones were so warm. They should be cool. They always were. How did they get so warm?

"He's delirious," said the voice. Hands lifted him and carried him and then he was in a darker place. Water was daubed over his face and poured over his neck, wrists, and arms. A distant voice said, "I swear by the gods and demons, Salaya, you haven't the brains of a three days' dead cat. If I hadn't ridden out to meet you, you'd have let this one die, too, wouldn't you?"

Borric felt water course into his mouth and he drank. Instead of the bitter half-cup, this was a veritable stream of almost fresh water. He drank.

Salaya's voice answered: "The weak ones fetch us nothing. It saves us money to let them die on the road and not feed them."

"You idiot!" shouted the other. "This is a prime slave! Look at him. He's young, not more than twenty years, if I know my business, and not bad looking under the sunburn, healthy—or at least he was a few days ago."

"Enough, keep him here under the wagon while I inspect the others. There may be more who will survive if I find them in time. I do not know what fate befell Kasim, but it was a sorry day for the Guild when you were left in charge."

Borric found this exchange very odd. And what had happened to the wine? He let his mind wander as he lay in the relative cool, under the wagon, while a few feet away, a Master of the Guild of Durbin Slavers inspected the others who in a day's time would be delivered to the slave pens.

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"Durbin!" said Salman. His face of dark knots split in a wide grin. He drove the last wagon in the train, the one in which Borric rode. The two days since Borric was carried into the shade of the wagon had returned him from the edge of death. He now rode in the last wagon

lands were now green rather than sandy. They had been passing small farms for about a half-day. He remembered what he had been taught about the infamous pirate stronghold as a boy.

Durbin commanded the only arable farm land between the Vale of Dreams and the foothills of the Trolhome Mountains, as well as the one safe harbor to be found from Land's End to Ranom. Along the south coast of the Bitter Sea the treacherous reefs waited for ships and boats unfortunate enough to be caught in the unexpected northern winds that sprang up routinely. For centuries, Durbin had been home to pirates, wreckers and scavengers, and slavers.

Borric nodded to Salman. The happy little bandit had proved to be both friendly and garrulous. "I've lived there all my life," said the bandit, widening his grin. "My father was born there, too."

When the desert men of the Jal-Pur had conquered

control the city?"

Salman laughed. "You're a very educated fellow! Few outside Durbin know of this thing. The Guild of Slavers,

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the Wreckers Guild, and the Captains of the Coast. Yes, the Three still rule in Durbin. It is they, not the Imperial Governor, who decide who is to live and die, who is to work, who is to eat." He shrugged. "It is as it has always been. Before the Empire. Before the desert men. Always."

Thinking of the power of the Mockers, the Guild of Thieves, in Krondor, he asked, "What of the beggars and thieves? Are they not a power?"

"Ha!" answered Salman. "Durbin is the most honest city in the world, my educated friend. We who live there lay at night with doors unlocked and may walk

he was the quickest to recover, as he was the youngest and fittest. The other three were older farmers, and none had shown any inclination to quick recovery. Despair robs you of strength faster than sickness, Borric thought.

He drank a little water and marveled at the first hint of ocean breeze that came into the wagon as they headed down the road toward the city gate. One of his father's advisors, and the man who had taught Borric and Eriand how to sail, Amos Trask, had been a pirate in his youth, rading the Free Cities, Queg, and the Kingdom under the name Captain Trenchard, the Dagger of the Sea. He had been a renowned member of the Captains of the Coast. But while he had told many tales of the high seas, he had said almost nothing of the politics of the Captains. Still, someone might remember Captain Trenchard and that might stand Borric in good stead.

Borric had decided to keep his identity hidden a

strength, then flee. While the desert was a formidable barrier, any small boat in the harbor would be his passage to freedom. It was nearly five hundred miles of sailing against prevailing winds to reach Land's End, Baron Locklear's father's city, but it could be done. Borric considered all this with a confidence of one who, at the age of nineteen, did not know the meaning of defeat. His captivity was merely a setback, nothing more.

The slave pens were sheltered by shingle roofs rested upon tall beams, protecting the slaves from the noon heat or unexpected storms off the Bitter Sea. But the sides were open slats and crossbeams, so the guards could watch the captives. A healthy man could easily climb over the ten-foot fence, but by the time he reached the top and crawled through the space between the fence and the crossbeams supporting the roof three feet above, guards would be waiting for him.

Borric considered his plight. Once he was sold, his

He had a plan. The only difficulty lay in getting cooperation from the other prisoners. If a long enough diversion could be arranged for, then he could be over the fence and out into the city. Borric shook his head. He realized as plans go, it wasn't much.

"Pssst!"

Borric turned to see from where the odd sound came. Seeing nothing, he turned back into himself as he considered improvements on his plan.

"Pssst! This way, young noble." Borric looked again through the bars of the pen, but this time down, and in the scant shadows he saw a slight figure.

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A boy, no more than eleven or twelve years old, grinned up at him from the meager shelter of a large roof support. If he moved more than inches in any di-

Borric said, "Why?"

"I need but a moment's distraction, sir."

Counting no harm from it, save perhaps a blow for insolence, Borric nodded. Moving to where the guards stood, he said, "Hey! When do we eat?"

Both guards blinked in confusion, then one snarled. He jammed the butt of his spear through the staves of the fence, and Borric had to dodge not to be struck. "Sorry I asked," he said.

Chuckling to himself, he moved his shoulders under the rough shirt they had given him, fighting the impulse to scratch. The sunburn was healing after being dressed for the last three days, but the peeling skin and the itching were making him doubly cross. The next slave auction was over a week away, and he knew he would be on the block. He was regaining his strength quickly.

Borric in a harsh whisper.

The boy laughed. "No, noble youth. I needed the distraction you so magnanimously provided, so I might enter the pen."

Borric looked heavenward. "Two hundred prisoners all dreaming continuously of a way out of here, and I have to meet the one madman in the world who wishes to break in! Why me?"

The boy looked up to where Borric's gaze went, and said, "To which deity does my lord speak?"

"All of them. Look, what is this all about?"

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The boy took Borric's elbow and steered him to the center of the pen, where they would be the least conspicuous to the guards. "It is a matter of some complex-

gested they were dark to the point of being black. Under a hood several sizes too large, ill-cropped coarse black hair shot out at differing lengths.

The boy made a slight bow. "All men are superior to one as low as I, my lord, and deserve respect. Even those pigs of guards."

Borric couldn't help but smile at this imp. "Well, then, tell me why you, alone among sane men everywhere, would wish to break into this miserable company?"

The boy sat upon the ground and motioned Borric to do likewise. "I am called Suli Abul, young sir. I am a beggar by trade. I am also, I am ashamed to admit, under threat of punishment from the Three. You know of the Three?" Borric nodded. "Then you know their wrath is great and their reach long. I saw an old merchant who had paused to sleep in the midday sun. From his torn purse, some coins had fallen. Had I waited until

am being sought after by the Three for punishment. Where better to hide than among those already condemned to slavery?"

Borric was silent for a moment, at a loss to answer that. Shaking his head in wonder, he asked, "Tell me, in

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nine days when we are to be sold, then what shall you do?"

With a laugh, the boy said, "By then, gentle lord, I shall be gone."

"And where shall you go?" asked the Prince, his eyes narrowing.

"Back to the city, young sir. For my transgressions are slight and the Three have much to concern their attentions. Some great issue is being decided now, at the

The boy shrugged. "Probably. Nothing in life is certain. I expect I shall be able to. If not, it's the gods' will."

Borric gripped the young beggar's shirt, pulling him close. In whispers, he said, "Then, my philosophical friend, we shall cut a bargain. I helped you in, and you shall help me out."

The boy's dark face paled. "Master," he said, almost hissing between his teeth, "for one as adroit as I, we might contrive a means to release you from your captivity, but you are the size of a mighty warrior, and those manacles upon your wrists confine your movement."

"Have you the means for my release of these?"

"How could I?" asked the frightened boy.

"You don't know? What kind of a thief are you?"

incompetent thief. I could get free myself if I had a pick." He took a breath, calming himself so as not to frighten the boy more. "I need a hard piece of wire, so long. A thin nail might work." He showed the boy by

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holding up thumb and forefinger, two inches of length. The manacle chain made the gesture difficult.

"I can get that, master."

"Good," said Borric, releasing the boy. The instant he was released, he turned as if to flee, but anticipating just such a reaction, Borric's foot went out and tripped the beggar. Before the boy could scramble to his feet, the Prince had him by the shoulder of his garment. "You make a scene," said the Prince, indicating the guards a short distance away with a nod of his head. "I know what you are going to do, boy. Don't seek to flee my grasp. If I'm to be sold at auction in a week's time, I

I will insure I don't go to the block alone. We are in this as one, do you understand?" The boy nodded, and this time Borric saw his agreement wasn't just to gain his freedom, but to show he believed Borric would indeed turn him over to the guards if he attempted to abandon the Prince. Borric released him, and the boy fell hard upon the ground. This time he didn't attempt to run, but simply sat upon the hard-packed dirt, a look of fear and hopelessness upon his face. "Oh, Father of Mercies, I pray you, forgive my foolishness. Why, oh, why did you cast me in with this mad lord?"

Borric settled to one knee. "Can you get me the wire, or were you just lying?"

The boy shook his head. "I can get it." He rose to his feet and motioned Borric to follow.

Borric followed him to the fence. The boy turned his back so the guards would not see his face should they look in his direction. Pointing to the boards, the boy

warp had bowed the fence outward slightly, pushing a nail out. The Prince leaned against that board and could feel the nailhead poking him in the shoulder.

Borric turned suddenly and pushed the boy against the board. The boy leaned into it and, in one motion, Borric hooked the edge of his metal cuff over the nail. "Now pray I don't bend it," he whispered. Then with a quick yank, the nail was free.

Stooping to pick it up, he moved to hide his prize from any watching eyes. Glancing around, he saw with relief that no one had bothered to take note of his odd behavior.

With little movements, he had one, then the other manacle off. He quickly rubbed his chafed wrists, then put the manacles back on.

"What are you doing?" whispered the young beggar.

orful childhood. Not all his lessons were standard teaching for—" He had almost said "Princes," but at the last instant, he said, "noble sons."

"Ah!" said the boy. "Then you are one of noble birth. I thought as much from your speech."

"My speech?" asked Borric.

"You speak like one of the commons, most noble lord. Yet your accent is that of one from the highest born families, even royalty itself."

Borric considered. "We're going to have to change that. If we are forced to hide in the city for any length of time, I must pass as a commoner."

The boy sat. "I can teach you." Looking down at the manacles, he said, "Why the special confinement, son of a most noble father?"

warts upon those who displease them."

Borric smiled. "I've almost convinced them I am a poor tutor."

"Then why have they not removed the chains?"

"I've almost convinced them."

The boy smiled. "Where shall we go, master?"

"To the harbor, where I plan to steal a small boat and make for the Kingdom."

The boy nodded his approval. "That is a fine plan. I shall be your servant, young lord, and your father will reward me richly for helping his son escape this evil den of black-souled murderers."

Borric had to laugh. "You're given to a noble turn of phrase yourself, now, aren't you?"

"If I say, 'May your wife's beauty turn to ugliness,' what merchant would bother to hesitate in his passing. But should I say, 'May your mistress grow to resemble your wife! And may your daughters do likewise!' then he'll pay many coppers for me to remove the curse, lest his daughters grow to look like his wife and he can find no husbands for them, and his mistress grow to look like his wife and he lose his pleasure."

Borric grinned, genuinely amused. "Have you such powers of cursing that men fear you so?"

The boy laughed. "Who's to say? But what man would hoard a few coppers against the chance the curse might work?"

Borric sat down. "I shall share my meals with you, as they account the bread and stew. But I must be free of this place before they finally tally for auction."

"Then they will raise alarm and search for you."

For seven days they had shared Borric's rations, and while they both felt hunger, it was sufficient for them;

the slavers gave generous portions for those heading toward the auction. No dark circles under eyes, nor hollow cheeks, nor shrunken frames would lower price if a few meals would prevent it.

If any others had noticed the unorthodox manner in which the boy had joined the company in the pen, no one commented upon it. The slaves were quiet, each man lost in his own thoughts, and little attempt was made to converse. Why bother to make friends with those you would most likely never see again?

Whispering so that no one would overhear, Borric said, "We must flee before the morning tally." The boy nodded, but said, "I don't understand." For seven days, he had been hiding behind the assembled slaves, ducking to not be included in the head count. Perhaps he

The boy made no pretense of understanding. "No, master."

Borric had spent the last week profitably picking the boy's brain for every piece of information he could about the city and what lay in the area surrounding the Slavers Guild. "Over that fence is the street to the harbor," Borric said, and Suli nodded to show he was correct. "Within minutes, dozens of guards will be racing down that street to find us before we can steal away on a boat for Queg or elsewhere, right?"

The boy nodded. It was the logical assumption. "No one in his right mind would risk the desert, right?"

"Certainly."

"Then we're going to head toward the desert."

soldiers' barracks at the Governor's house."

Borric grinned.

The boy's eyes widened. "Oh, gods preserve us, master, you can't mean ..."

Borric said, "Of course. The one place they'll never look for two runaway slaves."

"Oh, kind master. You must be joking to torment your poor servant."

"Don't look so crestfallen, Suli," said Borric, glancing around to make sure no one was watching. "You gave me the idea."

"I, master? I said nothing about delivering ourselves up to the Governor."

"No, but if you hadn't been trying to hide from the

cup with his hands. The boy took one step and Borric half-lifted, half-threw him up into the overhanging beams of the roof supports. The boy moved agilely along the beams to the farthest corner from the gambling guards, near where the single guard dozed.

Hesitation and any sort of noise would undo them, so Borric found himself holding his breath while the little beggar scampered to the corner of the pen. There Borric quickly climbed a few feet of fence, and reached up to grip the robe the boy had tied around the beam. Hauling himself over the fence with two pulls, he swung down to where the sleeping guard lay. Suli Abul climbed down to hang almost directly over the sleeping guard.

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In a coordinated movement, the boy lifted the guard's metal helm from his head as Borric swung the manacles. The iron struck the guard on the side of

Suli set off in a crouched-over, silent walk, along the beam that ran the length of the roof. Borric followed, though his bulk forced him to move on hands and knees, crawling behind the slight boy.

Over the gambling guards they moved, then into the gloom. At the far end of the compound, they dropped to the top of the last pen, then leaped to the outside wall. Half-falling, half-jumping, they hit the ground and were off in the night, running as if the entire garrison of Durbin was on their heels, heading straight for the home of the city's Governor.

Borric's plan had worked as he had thought it would. In the busy house of the Governor of Durbin, there was much confusion and many people moving. A nameless pair of slaves crossing the courtyard to the kitchen elicited no comment.

Within ten minutes, the alarm had been raised, and many of the city's watchmen were in the streets, crying

Borric nodded. He held up his finger to indicate silence, then lay back as if to sleep.

The excited boy could hardly believe his eyes when the young man fell into a fitful doze. Suli was too tense and excited—and afraid—to try to sleep. He glanced through the small roof window they had used to enter

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the attic, one which gave them a clear view of part of the Governor's courtyard and some of the other wing of the house.

After watching the occasional comings and goings of the household, the beggar turned to inspect the rest of the attic. He could stand easily enough, though Borric would have to stoop. He walked carefully upon the beams of the room, lest any who might happen to be beneath the attic hear movement.

He almost cried out as he turned to see a face inches from his own. Then his night vision adjusted and he saw he was nose to nose with a statue, the sort imported from Queg, life-size and carved from marble or some other stone.

The boy put his hand upon the stone head and lowered himself into the room. He glanced around and was satisfied the room was being used for storage. In a corner, under some bolts of cloth, he found a dull kitchen knife. A poor weapon was better than none, he thought, and he stuck the knife in his robe.

Moving as quietly as possible, the boy inspected the only door in the room. He tested it and found it unlocked. Opening it slowly, he peered through a tiny crack, into an empty, dark hall.

He moved cautiously into the hall and slowly walked to where the hall met with another, also dark. After

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mined to return to the attic, to see if he could get some rest.

Then, at the far end of the hall he was leaving, he noticed a faint line of light. At the same instant, the silence was broken by the distant sound of an angry voice.

Caution and curiosity fought. Curiosity won. The boy stole down the hall, to find a door through which muffled voices could be heard. Putting his ear to the wood, the boy heard a man shouting. ". . . Fools! If we had known ahead of time, we could have been prepared."

A second, calmer voice answered. "It was chance. No one knew what that idiot Reese meant when he brought word from Lafe that a princely caravan with few guards was ripe for the taking."

with us than I care to imagine. He was the only red-headed slave we took."

The calmer voice said, "Lord Fire will be displeased that he lives. With Borric thought dead, our master's mission is completed, but should a living Prince of Isles make his way home ..."

The angry voice said, "Then you must insure that he does not, and for good measure, that his brother dies, as well."

Suli attempted to peek through the crack of the door and saw nothing, then he looked through the keyhole. He could only see a man's back and part of a man's hand resting upon a desk. Then the man at the desk leaned forward, and Suli recognized the face of the Governor of Durbin. His was the angry voice. "No one outside this room can know the escaped slave is Prince Borric. He must not be allowed to identify himself to anyone. Circulate the rumor he killed a guard while escaping, and

not like a kill-on-sight order. They will want a public execution, preferably death by exposure in the cage, to warn others against attempting to escape."

The Governor said, "I will placate the guild. But the fugitive must not be allowed to speak. Should any discover we had a hand in this—" He left the thought unfinished. "I want Lafe and Reese silenced, as well."

Suli moved away from the door. Borric, he thought to himself. Then his new master was . . . Prince Borric, of the House of conDoin, son of the Prince of Krondor!

Never before had the boy known fear as he knew this minute. This was a game of dragons and tigers and he had stumbled into the middle of it. Tears ran down his face as he hurried to the attic, barely keeping his wits about him enough to close the door silently when he passed through into the storage room.

Using the Quegan statue, he boosted himself back

"Oh, my magnificent lord. Have mercy. They know who you are and they are searching for you in force. They seek to kill you before others discover your identity."

Borric blinked and gripped the boy by the shoulders.
"Who knows about me?"

"The Governor and another. I could not see who. This wing connects to where the Governor holds counsel with others. They speak of the slave with red hair who escaped this night, and they speak of the Prince of Isles. You are both."

Borric swore softly. "This changes nothing."

"It changes everything, gentle master," cried the boy. "They will not stop searching for you after a day, but will hunt you down for as long as they must. And they will kill me for what I know, too."

the truth were to be known, he had no idea what he would do next.

Chapter Eight

Escape

The boy shook his head no.

"Yes," repeated Borric.

Suli again shook his head. He had been almost speechless since returning to the attic. In a hoarse whisper, he said, "If I go back they shall kill me, my Prince."

Borric leaned forward and firmly took the boy's shoulders. He attempted to fill his voice with as much menace as possible while whispering. "And if you don't, I will kill you!" From the terror that shone from the boy's eyes, he must have succeeded.

royal prince from a neighboring kingdom was a shock, enough of a shock to push the boy to the brink of hysteria. Then by the time the boy had returned to the attic, it had sunk in that every power in the city of Durbin was being turned toward finding that Prince, with one thought in mind, to kill him! That had him teetering over the edge of hysteria. Then it hit him that whoever was found in the company of said Prince would be disposed of at the same time, to insure his silence, and the boy found himself hanging out over the brink of hysteria, his feet churning in air as he clung with all his might to what remained of his wits. He sat silently crying, only his fear of discovery keeping him from wailing like a scalded cat.

Borric at last saw the child was beyond reason. Shak-

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ing his head in disgust, he said, "Very well. You remain here and I'll go. Which way was it?"

I will go listen to what is said."

Once he had made the choice, the boy acted without hesitation, and moved back to the trapdoor. He levered it up and slipped through silently. Borric thought that despite everything, the boy showed a particular type of courage, doing what had to be done regardless of how frightened he was.

Time passed slowly for Borric and after what seemed an hour, he began to worry. What if the boy had been caught? What if instead of a round-faced little beggar coming through that trap, an armed warrior or assassin climbed into the attic?

Borric picked up the dull kitchen knife and held it tightly. It was scant comfort.

More minutes passed, and Borric was left alone with the sound of his own heartbeat. Someone wanted him dead. He had known that since the football match in

even a pest-hole city like Durbin to be involved in such a plot meant two things: the author of the plan to plunge the Empire into war with the Kingdom was placed highly enough to influence many people of rank, and the plot was far flung, as there were few places within the Empire farther away from the capital city as Durbin.

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The trap opened and Borric tensed, bringing his knife to the ready. "Master!" a familiar voice whispered. Suli had returned. Even in the dark, Borric could sense his excitement.

"What?"

The boy hunkered down close to Borric, so he could whisper the news. "Much consternation in the city from your escape. The auction is closed tomorrow! This is an unprecedented thing. All wagons and packtrains from

sooner or later someone will discover the cause. The Captains of the Coast have agreed to sweep the sea-lanes between the reefs and Queg, from here to Krondor, to find the runaway slave. And every building in the city is to be investigated, the search is underway even as we speak! I do not understand this thing."

Borric shrugged. "I don't know either. How they could get so many people to agree to this sort of business without telling them what they were after . . ." Borric moved toward a tiny gap in the support beam of the roof, where he could peek into the courtyard. "It's another five, six hours to dawn. We might as well get some rest."

"Master!" hissed the boy. "How can you rest? We must flee!"

Borric said softly, "Fleeing is what they expect. They are looking for a man who is fleeing. Alone. A red-haired man."

Sitting back on his haunches, the boy let out a long sigh. It was clear Suli wasn't pleased to hear this, but

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having nothing more intelligent to offer, he remained silent.

Borric awoke with a gulp of breath, his heart pounding in his chest. It was still dark. No, he corrected himself as he spied a bit of light entering through the crack at the roof line, it's still dark in this attic.

He had been dreaming, of a time when he and his brother had been playing in the palace as children, using the so-called secret passages that were used by servants to move unseen between the different suites. The boys had split up and Borric had become lost. He had waited a long, lonely time before his Uncle Jimmy

Then he realized he was alone. The boy, Suli, was gone!

Borric patted around in the dark for the knife and found it where he left it. Feeling only slightly better for the presence of the indifferent weapon, he wondered what the boy could be up to. Perhaps he figured to bargain his own life in exchange for knowledge of the whereabouts of a certain red-haired slave?

Borric felt close to panic. If the boy had indeed tried to bargain for his own safety, both were as good as dead. Forcing himself to calmness, he again peered through the little crack. It was nearly sunrise, and already the Governor's household was busy, with servants hurrying between the outbuildings, the kitchen, and the main house. Still, there was nothing to suggest other than the normal morning's activities. No armed men were in sight, no shouting voices would be heard.

Borric sat back and thought. The boy might not be

inan.

Always a hearty eater, Borric felt his stomach knot. He had never truly been hungry before in his life, and he didn't care for the feeling. He had been too miserable while traveling to Durbin to dwell much on his hunger; it was merely one among many afflictions. But now with his sunburn turned to a deep reddish tan and his strength almost returned in full, he was very aware of his empty stomach. He wondered if he could slip out into the early morning bustle, and decided against trying. Redheaded slaves over six feet tall were certainly not common in this city and he would probably be caught before he got within a hundred paces of the kitchen. As if fate conspired to torment him, a familiar odor came wafting in on the morning breeze. The kitchen cooked bacon and ham for the Governor's household. Borric's mouth began to water, and he sat for a miserable minute, thinking of breakfast cakes and honey, boiled eggs, fruit with cream, hot slabs of ham,

Borric discovered, that like hunger, waiting was not to his liking. He would lay back for a time, then cross over to the crack in the roof, peer through, and wonder how much time had passed. Once he even dozed for a while, and was disappointed to discover that—judging from the nearly unchanged shadow angles—only minutes had passed when he had hoped for hours. He returned to his place of resting, a section of attic where the floor seemed a little less uncomfortable than the rest of the floor, more likely due to his imagination than any real difference. He waited and he was hungry. No, he corrected himself. He was ravenous.

More time passed and again he dozed. Then to break the routine, he practiced some stretching exercises a

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Hadati warrior had once taught him and Eriand, designed to keep muscles loose and toned at times when

crack, observing the comings and goings of those in the Governor's courtyard. Several times, soldiers running messages hurried through Borric's field of vision. He considered: if he could stay hidden here long enough—assuming he could steal food and not get caught—in a few more days they would assume he had somehow slipped out of their grasp. At that time he might be able to sneak aboard an outbound ship.

Then what? He thought upon that prickly issue. It would do little good to return home, even if he should find a way. Father would only send fast riders south to Kesh with warnings to Eriand to be cautious. No doubt he could be no more cautious than he already was. With Borric's disappearance, Uncle Jimmy was sure to assume the worst and count Borric dead. It would take a gifted assassin to win past Earl James's notice. As a boy, Jimmy had rightly been counted something of a legend in the city. When years younger than Borric's present age, he was already a master thief and counted an adult by the Mockers. No mean feat that, Borric thought.

parted, so he was already gone. And the two Keshian magicians he left in charge were not men who appeared to Borric as likely candidates for generous help. There was something decidedly off-putting about both

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of them. And they were Keshian. Who knows how far this Lord Fire's plotting reaches? Borric considered.

Looking up from his musing, he realized that night was falling. The evening meal was being prepared in the kitchen and the smell of meat roasting over a spit was nearly enough to make him mad. In a few hours, he told himself. Just relax and let the time pass. ... It won't be long. In just a few more hours, the servants will be in their own beds. Then it will be time to steal out and—

Abruptly the trap moved and Borric's heart raced as he readied the knife to defend himself. The trap raised

Borric said, "Where did you go?"

Suli was carrying a sack that Borric could barely make out in the gloom. "I stole out before dawn, master, and as you were sleeping soundly I chose not to disturb you. Since then I have been many places." He opened the bag and brought forth a loaf of bread. Borric tore off a hunk and ate without having to be asked twice. Then the boy handed over a block of cheese and a small skin of wine.

Through his full mouth, Borric asked, "Where did you get this?"

The boy sighed, as if being back in the attic was a relief. "I have had a most perilous day, my kind master. I fled with the idea of perhaps leaving you, then considered what fate has offered. Should I be caught, I will be sold for a slave because of my incompetent theft. If I am linked with your escape, I will be dead. So, what are the

young master against the day you return to your father, to reward your faithful servant."

Borric laughed. "And what reward shall you have if we get safely back to Krondor?"

With a solemnity that almost made Borric laugh again, the boy said, "I wish to become your servant, master. I wish to be known as the Prince's body servant."

Borric said, "But what about gold? Or perhaps a trade?"

The boy shrugged. "What do I know of trade, master? I would be a poor merchant, and perhaps be ruined within a year. And gold? I would only spend it. But to be the servant of a great man is to be close to greatness in a way. Do you not see?"

doubted he knew more than one or two by name and perhaps only a dozen by sight. They were . . . part of the landscape, no more significant than a chair or a table. Borric shook his head, and sighed.

"What is it, master?"

Borric said, "I don't know if I can promise you a position that close to me, personally, but I will guarantee that you'll have a place in my household and that you will rise as high as your talents will take you. Is that fair enough?"

The boy bowed with solemn formality. "My master is most generous."

Then the boy pulled some sausage from the sack. "I knew you would be a generous, kind master, so I returned with many things—"

"Hold a moment, Suli. Where did you get all this?"

a man in the bazaar. I took the coins he gave me and purchased many things. Not to worry. I moved along and purchased each item from a different merchant, insuring no one knew what business I was upon. Here." He handed Borric a shirt.

It was nothing fancy but obviously a significant improvement over the rough homespun the slavers had given him. Then the boy passed over a pair of cotton trousers, the kind worn by sailors throughout the Bitter Sea. "I could not find boots, master, that I could purchase, yet have enough left for food."

Borric smiled at the boy. "You did well. I can go without the boots. If we're to pass as sailors, bare feet will not bring us any notice. But we'll have to sneak to the harbor at night and hope no one sees this red hair of mine under a lamp."

"I have taken care of that, master." The boy handed over a vial of some liquid and a comb. "I have this from

"That will pass, according to the merchant."

"You'd better put it in my hair. I wouldn't want to pour it over half my head. There's barely enough light for you to see what you're doing."

The boy moved behind him and ungently rubbed the vial's contents into the Prince's hair. He then combed it through, many times over, spreading it as evenly as possible. "With your sunburn, Highness, you will look every inch the Durbin sailor."

"And what of you?" asked Borric.

"I have trousers and a shirt in the bag, too, my master. Suli Abul is known for his beggar's robe. It is large enough for me to hide limbs when I play at being deformed."

Borric laughed as the boy continued to work on his

Governor's home, as it was logical to assume the fugitive was unlikely to be anywhere near the heart of Durbin authority. Which is why they made back toward the slave pens. If the Governor's house was an unlikely place for the fugitives to hide, the slave quarters were even less likely. Borric was not entirely comfortable being in a rich part of town, as the presence of two obviously shabby figures near the residences of the wealthy and powerful was in and of itself sufficient to bring unwanted scrutiny upon them.

When they were but a block from the slave quarters, Borric halted. Upon the wall of a storage shed was a newly hung broadside. Painted by skilled craftsmen, it proclaimed in red letters a reward. Suli said, "Master, what does it say?"

Borric read aloud. " 'Murder most foul!' it says. It says that I killed the wife of the Governor." Borric's face went pale. "Gods and demons!" He quickly read the entire broadside, then said, "They say a Kingdom-born

roughly five thousand Kingdom Sovereigns, or the income from a small estate for a year—a staggering sum indeed for the capture, dead or alive, of a runaway slave, but one who had murdered the city's foremost lady of society. Borric shook his head in pained realization. "The swine murdered his own wife to give the guards a reason to kill me on sight," he whispered.

Suli shrugged. "It is no surprise when you understand that the Governor has a mistress who demands more and more from him. To put aside his first wife and

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marry his mistress—after the appropriate period of mourning, of course—will ease two sources of concern for him: keeping his mistress and Lord Fire happy. And while astoundingly beautiful, the mistress would do well to consider the future of one who marries a man who killed his first wife to make her his second. When she becomes older and less fair of face—"

glancing in all directions. "Now, master, we know how the Governor convinced the Three to help apprehend you. The Three and the Imperial Governor have little love amongst them, but they have less love for slaves who murder their lawful lords."

Borric could only agree. But he found the Governor's means to achieve that reaction chilling. Even if he hadn't loved the woman, he had lived with her for some number of years. Wasn't there any compassion in him? wondered Borric.

Rounding a corner, they saw the side of the slave pens. Because the auction had been canceled, the pens were especially crowded. Borric turned his face toward Suli and moved steadily, but not so hurried as to attract attention. To any guards who might be looking, he was simply a sailor speaking to a boy.

A pair of guards walked around a corner and approached them. Instantly, Suli said, "No. You said I

kitchen while I'm gone." The guards gave the pair a quick glance, then continued on.

Borric resisted the temptation of looking to see if the

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guards were paying attention. He would know quickly enough if they became suspicious. Then Borric turned another corner and collided with a man. For a brief instant the stranger looked into his eyes with a threatening mutter, his alcohol-laden breath in Borric's face, then the man's expression turned from drunken irritation to murderous hatred. "You!" said Salaya, reaching for the large dagger in the belt of his robe.

Reacting instantly, Borric put his fingers together in a point and drove it as hard as he could into Salaya's chest, right below the bottom-most ribs. As his fingers smashed into the nerves there, Salaya's breath was driven from his lungs. As he struggled to catch his

two friends, a man and boy, helping home a friend who had had too much to drink.

Halfway down the street they came to an alley and turned into it, dragging the now-unconscious man along like so many sacks of rotten vegetables. Borric deposited him on a pile of refuse and quickly had his purse off. A fair number of Keshian and Kingdom coins weighed down the heavy leather pouch. That went inside Borric's shirt. He removed the belt knife and sheath, wishing the slaver had carried a sword as well. As he hesitated as to what to do next, Suli stripped Salaya of his rings, four from his hands, two from his ears. Then the boy took off the slaver's boots and hid them. "If we leave anything of value behind, it will look suspicious." Stepping back, he said, "You can kill him now, master."

Borric halted. "Kill him?" Suddenly it registered. He had dreamed of revenging himself upon this swine, but all those visions had involved killing him in a duel, or

fore someone chances upon us. The city stirs and this alley will be traveled shortly. Someone is bound to find him soon. If he is not dead ..." He let the consequences of that go unspoken.

Steeling himself, Borric withdrew the knife he had taken from Salaya and held it. But then he was confounded by a completely unexpected concern: how to do it? Should he drive the knife into the man's stomach, cut his throat, or just what?

Suli said, "If you wish not to kill a dog, master, let your servant do it for you, but it must be done now! Please, master."

The thought of letting the boy kill was even more repugnant to Borric, so he pulled his arm back and drove the knife into the slaver's throat. There was not the slightest movement from Salaya. Borric stared in astonishment, then with a bitter laugh, he said, "He was already dead! The second blow must have broken his

master! Please!" He tugged on Borric's tunic, and the Prince let the boy pull him out of the alley.

When he was clear of the sight of the dead slaver, Borric turned his thoughts away from revenge and back toward escape. Putting his hand upon Suli's shoulder, he said, "Which way to the harbor?"

Suli didn't hesitate. He pointed down a long street and said, "That way."

"Then lead on," was Borric's answer. And the beggar boy led the Prince through a city ready to kill them both at a moment's notice.

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"That one," said Borric, indicating a small sailboat tied to a relatively lonely dock. It was a pinnace, the sort used as a tender, to run to and from larger ships in the harbor, carrying passengers, messages, and very small

the theft of the boat would be observed.

Borric looked about and pointed to a coil of old, filthy rope that lay nearby. Suli picked it up, and slung the wet, foul-smelling coil over his shoulder. Borric then picked up a discarded wooden crate, pushing the open slats closed. "Follow me," he said.

No one paid any attention to two sailors walking purposefully toward the small boat at the end of the docks. Borric put the crate down and jumped into the boat, quickly untying the bow line. He turned to find Suli standing in the rear of the boat, an open look of perplexity upon his face. "Master, what do I do?"

Borric groaned. "You've never sailed?"

"I have never been on a boat before in my life, master."

Borric said, "Bend down and look like you're doing

done, he said, "Come take the tiller." The boy moved to sit where the Prince had, and Borric gave him the tiller and the boom hawser. "Keep it pointed that way," the Prince instructed, pointing at the harbor mouth, "while I see what we have here."

Borric went to the front of the boat and pulled a small

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boat's locker out from under the foredeck. The box was unlocked and inside he found little of value: a single sail, a rusty scaling knife left over from when the boat had belonged to an honest fisherman, and some frayed line. He doubted any fish caught on that line would be big enough for more than bait. There was also a small wooden bucket bound in iron, used as a bailer or to pull up water to keep a catch wet, back when this boat was used for fishing. A rusty lantern without oil was his only other discovery. Turning to face the boy who studied the sail and held the tiller with fierce concentration on

way of life. . . .

The wind was a brisk nor'easter, and the pinnacle was fastest in a broad beam reach, so Borric turned her north by northwest as he left the harbor mouth. The boy looked both terrified and exhilarated. He had been babbling most of the way through the harbor, obviously his means of dealing with his fear, but as they had exited the harbor mouth, with no more than a casual glance by the deck crew of a large lateen-rigged caravel, the boy's fear had vanished. Borric had sailed intentionally close to the ship, as if unconcerned by its presence, but rather irritated by the need to sail around it.

Now with the harbor mouth behind them, Borric said, "Can you climb?"

The boy nodded, and Borric said, "From the front—and mind the sail—climb the mast to that ring up there and hang on. Look in all directions and tell me what you see."

along that way!" He pointed eastward, then swept with his hand toward the north.

"Sails?"

"I think so, master. They mark the horizon as far as I can see."

"What about to the north?"

"I think I see some sails there, too, master!"

Borric swore. "What of to the west?"

The boy squirmed and shouted, "Yes, there are some there, too."

Borric considered his choices. He had thought to escape to Ranom, a small trading port to the west, or if needs be, LiMeth, a modest city high up on the south-

Borric signaled for Suli to climb down and when the boy was near, the Prince said, "I think we'll have to run to the northwest and get around the pickets. He glanced at the sun and said, "If we steer away from those western pickets, they're sure to come running, but if we hold a steady course as if we're simply going about our business, we may fool them." He looked down. "See how the water changes color from here"—he pointed—"to there?"

The boy nodded. "That's because this is a deep channel, and that is a coral reef. This boat has a very shallow draft, so we can slip above those reefs, but that big ship we saw at the harbor would bottom out here and crash. We must also be cautious; some of these reefs are too near the surface for even our small boat, but if we are alert, we can avoid them."

The boy looked at Borric with fear in his eyes. He obviously felt overwhelmed by what the Prince was

shallow a draft as we have and probably be faster."

Checking the luff of the sail to make sure he was at the proper angle to the wind for maximum speed, Borric said, "Just keep watching that white speck on the western horizon, Suli, and tell me if it starts to get bigger."

With concentration that bordered on the single-minded, the boy hung over the windward side of the boat, using the angle of the craft as a means to sit at the highest perch possible, short of climbing the mast again. For the better part of an hour the white spot appeared to neither shrink nor grow, then suddenly it was heading straight at them. "Master!" the boy yelled. "They are coming!"

Borric turned the craft, attempting to get the maximum angle to the wind for speed, but the sail slowly grew. It was a faster craft. "Damn," he swore. "They'll overtake us if we keep running."

Suli shouted, "Master, another!"

neither redheaded. But the ships on picket would only know a sail was on the horizon. They would intercept, and Borric wanted nothing to do with close inspection. In Durbin, he might have tried to bluff his way out with a contrived story, but out here, with freedom so close, he wasn't going to chance another capture. To be caught was to be killed, he reminded himself.

Borric looked about and said, "Come here!"

The boy hurried to Borric's side and the Prince gave him the tiller and boom line. "Hold on this course."

Borric moved quickly to the front of the boat and took the second sail from the locker. He attached it to

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the front of the mast, but didn't raise it. "Hurry, master!" cried the boy.

the reefs. But the first boat they had seen was a fore-and-aft-rigged, sleek-looking sloop. Newly found upon the Bitter Sea over the last twenty years, they were favored by pirates working the shoals of the southern coast. Faster than the pinnace in a light wind, they were more maneuverable and had almost as shallow a draft. Borric's only hope was to get past the sloop, put on more canvas, and get into the shallowest water possible. Only in a very heavy wind in a broad reach could his pinnace possibly outrun that boat.

The larger boat moved to cut off Borric's smaller craft and he eased off the tiller, turning more and more upwind. Then he jibbed his boat and left the galleon wallowing close-hauled into the wind, its speed evaporating like water on a hot stone.

The sloop turned to cut him off as he sailed back toward the reef, and Borric spilled wind from his sail, letting the captain of the larger boat think he had cut off the fugitives. Borric concentrated, as it was going to be

breeze, but not by much. And if he attempted to stay that course he would end up sailing directly back to the galleon.

Borric let the pursuing craft get near enough to make out the crew, nearly thirty unsavory-looking thugs, all

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armed with sword and pike. If there are archers on the boat, he thought to himself, we'll never make it alive.

Then he surprised the crew of the sloop and Suli both, by jibbing his boat directly toward the larger craft. Suli cried out and threw his arms before his face, expecting a collision, but rather than the crack of splitting timbers, the only sound above the sounds of the sea were the loud oaths from the sailors on the sloop, taken by surprise. The sloop's helmsman reacted as Borric hoped he would, turning his wheel hard over. The sloop's captain's curses filled the air. The helmsman was now steer-

the canvas snapping taut echoed across the waters as the pinnacle seemed to jump away, running before the wind. Astonished-looking sailors stood at the rail of the sloop with their mouths open. Then one made so bold as to attempt to leap across the narrow gap between. He fell only a few feet short of the stern of Borric's craft.

Borric yelled, "Suli! Come here!"

The boy scampered to take the tiller from Borric, while the Prince raced the mast. The instant he was sure they were on a running broad reach again, he hauled the second sail aloft, making a crude spinnaker. He hoped it would give the pinnacle just enough extra speed to stay away from the sloop.

The captain of the sloop, swearing mightily, ordered his men to come about. Quickly, the nimble boat turned and gave chase. Borric divided his attention fore and aft, watching to see if the larger boat was overtaking them, and then looking to see they stayed clear of dan-

Prince in confusion, not understanding the nautical term.

Borric yelled back, "More to the right!" Borric turned his attention back to the dangers ahead. He shouted to Suli, directing him first to come a little right, then left. then right again, as they steered a maddening course through the shoals.

Borric glanced back and saw the larger boat had closed some distance, and he cursed. Even with the spinnaker, they were not moving fast enough. He yelled, "Turn toward shore!"

The boy reacted instantly, turning so hard Borric almost lost his footing. Borric looked for rocks, rocks just below the surface of the water that they could avoid but that would bring their pursuer to a nasty halt.

As they moved closer to shore, the boat's up and

As if the Laughing Lady had heard him, Borric felt the boat on the rise as they passed over the spot he had marked. Even so, as they started to feel the boat come down, a groaning, tearing sound of the bottom scraping rock could be heard and a teeth-jarring vibration came up through the hull of the boat.

Suli's face turned ashen as he crouched, holding on to the tiller as if it were his only connection to life. Borric shouted, "Come left!" and the boy yanked upon the tiller. Again the sound of wood scraping over rock filled their ears, but the boat settled down into a trough and rose without further difficulty.

Borric glanced back and saw the sloop heeling over as the captain gave orders to his frantic crew to turn away from shoals too lethal even for his shallow craft. Borric gave a low whistle of relief.

Turning his mind to what to do next, he signaled Suli to head slightly away from the coast, picking up speed

boats.

Borric lowered the makeshift spinnaker and took the tiller from Suli. The boy grinned at him with an expression that was half-delight, half-terror. Perspiration soaked the lad's tunic and Borric found himself wiping his drenched brow.

Borric pointed the boat slightly upwind and could see the sloop's sail falling off even farther as the reef ran off toward the northwest. He laughed. Even with the head-sail jib the sloop's crew was running out, it was too late. By the time they rounded the reef, the pinnace would be so far ahead they could be anywhere upon the sea. It would be nightfall before the distance could be made up, and Borric planned on being far away by nightfall.

The next two hours passed uneventfully, until Suli left his place at the bow and came toward Borric. Borric noticed water splashing under the boy's feet.

The boy turned, got the bucket, and began bailing out the water. For an hour or so it seemed the boy kept even with the incoming water, but after another hour of the exhausting work, the water had gathered about his ankles. Borric ordered him to switch places and took over. After another hour, it was clear that even when bailing at a furious rate, it would prove an eventually hopeless undertaking. Sooner or later the boat was going to sink. The only question seemed to be when and where.

Borric glanced to the south and saw that not only had the coastline been running southwest, away from them, but their course was northwest, toward the Straits of Darkness. By his reckoning, they were now as far away

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from the coastline as they could get, slightly northeast of Ranom, where the coastline would turn northward.

As the sun sped westward, Borric and Suli alternated bailing out the boat and keeping it pointed toward LiMeth. Near sundown, a scattering of clouds appeared in the north and the wind turned, now blowing into their faces. The pinnacle was decent enough traveling into the eye of the wind, but Borric doubted they would survive long enough to reach land if it started to rain. As he considered this, the first drops hit him in the face, and less than an hour later, the rain began to fall in earnest.

As the sun rose, a ship was upon them. Borric had seen its approach for the last quarter hour, as it suddenly had appeared out of the predawn gloom. Both the Prince and Suli, exhausted from a night's bailing to keep afloat, could barely move. Yet Borric mustered what little reserve of energy he possessed and stood up.

They had taken down the sail at sundown, decided it was better to drift in the dark and have both of them bail for periods, than to sail blindly in the dark. The

be their salvation or their doom.

When the ship was close enough for him to be heard, Borric called out, "What ship?"

The Captain of the vessel came to the rail as he ordered the helm put over, bringing the ship to a slow

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pace as it passed Borric's sinking pinnace, wallowing in the chop. "The Good Traveler, out of Bordon."

"Where are you bound?"

"Bound for Farafra," came the reply.

Borric's heart began to beat again. It was a Free Cities trader bound for an Empire city on the Dragon Sea.

"Have you berths for two?"

"I've all the hands I need," called back the Captain.

Borric knew by stories that the Captain would not likely leave them to drown—sailor's superstition forbade it—but he could exact a price of an indenture for several cruises; seamen were an inconstant lot and keeping a steady crew was difficult. The Captain was bargaining. Borric pulled out the rusty fishing knife and brandished it. "Then I order you to strike your colors;

you are all my prisoners."

The Captain stared in wide-eyed disbelief, then began to laugh. Soon every sailor on the ship was laughing uproariously. After a moment of genuine amusement, the Captain called out, "Bring the madman and the boy aboard. Then make for the Straits!"

Chapter Nine

Welcome

Before them stood the Imperial City, Kesh. They had entered the "lower city" an hour earlier, to be met by a delegation from the City Governor and his retinue. It was the same ceremony they had been forced to endure at each stop along the wearisome journey from Nar Ayab to the capital. When the Governor of Nar Ayab had met them at the outskirts of town, Eriand found the welcome a relief from his black mood. He had been numb with Borric's death for nearly a week, giving himself over to dark bouts of depression, interspersed with rage at the unfairness of it all. The pageantry of the Governor's welcome had taken his mind off the ambush for the first time, and the novelty of seeing such a display had kept him diverted for over three hours.

But now, the displays wore upon his patience. He had received another extravagant welcome at the cities of Kh'mrat and Khattara, and a half-dozen other welcomes that might have been smaller in scale, but were just as formal and tedious at smaller towns along the way. From any official from Regional Governor

Wazir, one of the desert people of the Jal-Pur. Many

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desertmen had come to Imperial service over the last hundred years, with a marked preference and talent for diplomacy and negotiations. Kesh's old Ambassador to the Western Realm, Abdur Rachman Memo Hazara-Khan, deceased for ten years now, had once told Eriand and his brother, "We are a horse people, and as such we are rigorous horse traders." Eriand had heard his father curse the man with grudging respect enough times to believe it so. He knew that whatever else this protocol officer might be, he was no man's fool and he needed to be watched. The desertmen of the Jal-Pur were terrible enemies.

Kafi said, "Yes, Your Highness. How may I serve you?"

Eriand said, "This is a bit of a change from what we've been seeing. Who are these soldiers?"

for gold thread and pearls.

"These are the Imperial Household Guard, Highness."

Eriand casually said, "So many?"

"Yes, Highness."

"It looks almost like a full city garrison," observed Locklear.

The Keshian said, "It would depend which city, m'lord. For a Kingdom city, it is. For a Keshian city, not quite. For the city of Kesh, but a small part."

"Would it be giving military secrets away to ask how many soldiers guard the Empress?" asked Eriand drily.

"Ten thousand," answered Kafi.

upper and lower city, ten thousand soldiers stand ready to defend She Who Is Kesh."

They turned their horses along the route lined by soldiers, and curious citizens, who stood and observed the passing Islemen in relative quite. Eriand saw the road turn upward and climb an incline, a gigantic highway of stone that wound its way up to the top of the plateau. Halfway up the ramp, a gold-and-white banner flew and, Eriand took note, the uniform of the soldiers above and below changed. "These are different regiments, then?" he asked.

Kafi said, "In ancient times, the original people of Kesh were but one of many nations around the Overn Deep. When pressed by enemies, they fled to the plateau upon which the palace rests. It has become tradition that all who serve the Empire, but who are not of true Keshian stock, live in the city below the palace." He pointed up the ramp to where the banner flew. "All

was a mere fact of Keshian life.

As they neared the bottom of the ramp, Eriand also could see that those who stood guard along the route were much as he had seen throughout the Empire so far: men from all races and of all appearances—more dark skins and hair coloring than in the Kingdom, to be certain, but a few redheaded and blond citizens. But those above the banner were of nearly uniform appearance: dusky skin, but not black or dark brown, nor fair. Hair uniformly black or dark brown, with an occasionally red cast to it, but no real redheads, blonds, or light browns in sight. It was clear that this company of soldiers came from bloodlines with little intermixing with the other peoples of Kesh.

Eriand studied the wall that ran along the edge of the

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plateau above, noticing the many spires and towers visi-

centuries, they were displaced. Even the great temples were relocated below so that those not of true Keshian blood could worship."

Eriand was impressed. Under the rulership of Mad King Rodric, the city of Rillanon had been beautified to become the most splendid city on Midkemia, or that was Rodric's stated ambition. But Eriand was forced to admit that even had Rodric's plan come to fruition, even with the marble facings on all public buildings, the gardens along the walking paths throughout the city, the waterways around the palace, even with all that, Rillanon was a poor thing next to the city of Kesh. It was not that Kesh was a lovely city; it wasn't. Many of the streets they had ridden were packed tight with dirty little buildings thick with the odors of life—cooking, the acrid smell of the forge, the pungent leather of the tanner, and the ever-present stink of unwashed bodies and human waste.

There was little that was lovely in the city of Kesh.

teacher had meant. The stones under his horse's hooves were worn with the passage of raiders, captive chieftains, and triumphant captains before Rillanon had come under conDoin rule. And conquering armies under legendary generals passed here to bring subjugation to other nations when Rillanon and Bas-Tyra first

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began their trade wars, two city-states seeking dominance over what would come to be called the Kingdom Sea. Kesh was old. Very old.

Kafi said, "Of course. Your Highness, those who are guests of the Empress, will be housed in a special wing of the palace, overlooking the Overn Deep. It would be unkind to require you to ride this route daily."

Eriand came out of his reverie and said, "But you ride this route each day, do you not?"

more colorfully dressed than the one before. The thundering drums ceased, and a band of musicians played something that sounded suspiciously like a Kingdom tune but played by those who had never heard such.

To James, he said, "Welcomed in grand fashion."

James nodded absently. Since reaching the city, he had let old habits of watchfulness come to the fore. His eyes constantly scanned the crowd, looking for any sign that trouble was coming at Eriand. Messages had been dispatched to Krondor and an answer had overtaken them, as the Keshian rider post had operated with amazing efficiency in carrying word to Arutha of Borric's death and bringing his answers. There had been many letters in the pouch the rider had carried. The Kingdom rider was exhausted as he had been ordered not to surrender the contents of the diplomatic pouch to any but Earl James, Baron Locklear, or Prince Eriand. He had been escorted by a changing succession of Keshian post riders, changing fresh horses at stations

recommendation for promotion and reward for his heroic ride.

Arutha's reply to the news of Borric's death had been what James expected: closed off, all personal reaction to the news absent. The Prince of Krondor let nothing sway him from the hard choices he faced as ruler of the Western Realm. He had cautiously instructed Earl James to see to recovering Borric's body, but that under no circumstances was there to be any significant change in their demeanor. The envoy's first duty was to pay the Kingdom's respects to the Empress, on the event of her seventy-fifth birthday Jubilee, and nothing was to cause more friction between the two nations. James smelled trouble. Borric had been murdered to plunge the Empire into war with the Kingdom, but Arutha had refused to rise to the bait. This could only mean an escalation in the provocations. And the only thing James could imagine more provocative than killing one Prince of the Blood would be killing both of them.

signs of discomfort. She had born up under the rigors of the long trip without complaint, and each night as she lay at James's side, she was well aware that their happiness at being together took away the day's discomfort but could not eradicate James's pain at Borric's death, nor his concern for Eriand's well-being. She nodded toward the front of the procession. The most official welcome yet, my darling.

At least a hundred officials stood just a short distance beyond the white-and-gold banner, to welcome the Prince and his retinue to the upper city. Eriand's eyes opened slightly at the sight. The first impression was disbelief, as if some odd joke was being perpetrated upon him. For standing before him were men and women wearing very little clothing and a great deal of

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jewelry. The common dress was a simple skirt or kilt, fashioned from gauzy silk, wrapped once about the

Kafi spoke with his head turned slightly toward Eriand. "Perhaps Your Highness didn't know, but the nudity taboo common to your nation and some of the people of the Empire does not exist among those of the true Keshian blood. I also had to become accustomed to the sight—among my people, to see another man's wife's face is to die." With an ironic note, he said, "These people are from a hot land. Highness, but not so hot as my home desert, where to dress such would be to invite death. When you experience the long, hot, windy nights up on the plateau, you will understand why here clothing is a matter of fashion only. And the Keshian truebloods have never been terribly concerned with the sensibilities of their subject peoples. 'In Kesh you do as the true Keshians do,' goes an old adage."

Eriand nodded, attempting not to stare at so much skin. A man stepped forward, not much older than Eriand, powerfully muscled and carrying a shepherd's crook and a bow, both which appeared ceremonial

To the heavy man, Kafi said, "My lord Nirome. I have the honor of presenting His Highness, Prince Eriand, Heir to the Throne of Isle, Knight-Captain of the Armies of the West, and envoy to She Who Is Kesh."

"Your Highness," said the stout Nirome. "To honor

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your arrival, one of the Imperial blood comes to greet you. It is my great honor to present Prince Awari, son of She Who Is Kesh."

The young man stepped forward again, and spoke directly to Eriand. "We welcome our brother Prince. May your stay here be happy and for as long as it pleases you. Prince Eriand. For the King of Isles to send his heir is an honor indeed. She Who Is Mother To Us All is pleased enough to have sent her poor son to bid you welcome. I am to tell you that all Kesh's hearts are gladdened the moment you come to us and that each

James behind.

As they moved up the ramp, James turned to Kafi and said, "In truth, we know so little about the Empire, save what we see along its northern border. It would please His Highness if you could guest with us and perhaps tell us more of this wondrous place."

The man smiled and James saw something in his eyes. "Your wish has been anticipated. I shall be outside your door at first light each day and not be gone from your side until you have given me leave to depart. The Empress, blessings be upon her, has ordered it so."

James smiled and inclined his head. So, he's our watchdog.

Gamina smiled at those nearby and said Among many, I'm sure, beloved.

James turned his attention to the front of the com-

Eriand was almost incapable of words. His "apartment" was a six-room complex set off in the "wing" of the palace set aside for them, which itself was nearly as large as his father's palace in Krondor. The Imperial palace was indeed a city unto itself. And the guest apartments were opulent beyond imagining. The stone walls had all been faced with marble, polished to a brilliance that reflected back torchlight like the sparkle of a thousand jewels. Rather than the Kingdom fashion of many small rooms, all the rooms in the apartment were large, but able to be partitioned by hanging curtains of varying opacity. Right now, the only curtains were to his right and left, and both were transparent gauze, allowing him to see that divans and chairs were arrayed in anticipation of his need for holding conferences. And at his left, a large terrace permitted a stunning view of the Overn Deep, the gigantic freshwater lake that was the heart of this Empire. The sleeping chamber lay just beyond a pair of doors in this, the audience chamber, where he could meet with his advisors if needed.

Everywhere he glanced, he saw gold. It was used on the tables and divans, stools and chairs that were arrayed around the room, for whatever needs he might have while dressing, composing messages, or eating a solitary meal. High upon the wall, the marble ceased and was replaced by sandstone, upon which murals of bright color had been painted against the muted ocher of the sandstone. In the stylized Keshian fashion, they showed warriors, kings, and gods, many depicted with animal heads, as the Keshians gave aspects to the gods that differed markedly from how they were perceived in the Kingdom.

Eriand stood silently taking in the splendor of the room. A giant bed dominated the chamber, surrounded

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on three sides by gauzy silk curtains, hanging from a ceiling twenty feet above his head. The bed was twice the size of his own large bed at home, which had

attack, Eriand could not admit to his brother's death. Somehow it just didn't feel within as if Borric was dead. He was out there somewhere, Eriand was certain. The young woman who had entered with them clapped again, and suddenly the room was filled with activity.

The Prince's guards stood in mute amazement at the seemingly endless parade of Keshian servants who paraded through the suite, first for their quick efficiency in unpacking the Prince's baggage and laying out formal clothing upon an armoire nearby, but mostly for the fact they were women, all beautiful and all clad in the same scanty fashion as the welcoming committee. The only difference was the lack of jewelry. The plain kilt was bound about the waist with a linen belt. Other than that, the women were naked.

Crossing to where the two guards stood, Eriand said, "Go get something to eat. If I need you, I'll send word."

The two saluted and turned, obviously uncertain of

women.

Feeling suddenly both overdressed in the still hot air in the palace, and dirty from two days' ride, Eriand nodded and followed the woman into the next chamber. There a pool at least thirty feet long awaited. At the far end a gold statue of some sort of water spirit held a

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vase pouring water into the pool. Eriand glanced around, for at least five women waited for him in the pool, all without clothing.

Two others stepped to his sides, while the one who led him turned and began unfastening his tunic.

"Er . . ." began Eriand, reflexively stepping away.

"Is there something amiss, m'lord?" asked the young woman with the mahogany eyes. Eriand was suddenly aware that her dark skin was several hues: a reddish

serving women. But alone ... he felt awkward.

"What is your name?"

"Miya, m'lord."

"Ah, Miya . . ." He glanced at all the lovely ladies

waiting for him to make his requirements known. "...

In my land it is not the custom for so many servants to

... so many are not needed."

The young woman's eyes searched his for an instant.

Softly she answered, "If m'lord would indicate which servants he finds pleasing, I will send the rest away."

She hesitated a second, then added, "Or should you wish but one, I would be most honored to ... care for your needs, m'lord." The last was said with clear meaning.

Eriand shook his head. "No, I mean ..." He sighed in resignation. "Just get on with it."

upon the step just behind Eriand. Clapping once, an-

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other bath attendant signaled those outside of the pool to begin bringing oils, soaps, and unguents.

With gentle pressure on his shoulders, Miya drew him back until his head was resting upon her soft breasts. Then he felt her fingers working upon his scalp as she rubbed scented oils into his hair. Two other servants were now at his side, rubbing his chest with soaps that smelled faintly of flowers. Another two then began to clean and trim his fingernails, while two more were busy kneading the tired muscles in his legs.

After the first moment of tension at being handled so intimately by seven strange women, Eriand took a deep breath, willing himself to relax. This was not much different from having one of the serving men scrub his

used to."

The woman ceased washing his hair, rinsing his head with water from a golden bowl, then she began to knead the muscles of his neck and shoulders. Despite his self-consciousness at being in the pool with the nude servants, he found that the persistent massage was causing his eyelids to feel heavy. Smelling the lovely sun-touched fragrance of Miya's damp skin along with the soft aromas of the oils, he closed his eyes and felt fatigue and worry begin to slip away from him.

He sighed deeply, and Miya spoke softly. "Does m'lord desire anything?"

Eriand smiled for the first time since the bandits' attack and said, "No, I think I could get used to this."

"Then rest, my handsome young lord with the fire hair," she whispered in his ear. "Rest and refresh yourself, for tonight She Who Is Kesh will receive you."

into a hazy, sensuous doze, and as he relaxed, he felt himself responding to the gentle caresses of the women. Through lowered lashes he saw smiling faces looking at him with expectation, as two of the servants exchanged whispers and stifled a giggle. Yes, he thought, I could get used to this.

One of the servants shook his foot, as she whispered, "M'lord!"

Eriand elbowed himself up to see what was occurring and blinked through sleepy eyes. Rousing himself fully awake, Eriand said, "What?"

"The Lord James sends word he will be here within the half-hour, m'lord. He advises you to be ready for your presentation to the Empress. You must get dressed."

Eriand looked first right, then left, and found himself hemmed in on both sides by two motionless bodies; on

huge bed in one fluid motion. She signaled by clapping her hands once and instantly a half-dozen more slaves appeared with Eriand's wardrobe, cleaned and ready to wear. Eriand jumped out of bed and motioned for them to wait and hurried into the room with the pool. Motioning the servants to stay out of his way, he walked down the three steps, dunked himself under, and rinsed off. To Miya, who had followed him, he remarked, "I was drenched. And I needed this."

The woman smiled slightly. "You were . . . very active for a time, m'lord."

Eriand returned the slight smile. "Is it always so hot?"

The girl said, "This is the summer season, so it is like this. Fans are used to cool those who wish them. In the winter, it is really very cold at night and many furs are needed upon the beds to keep warm."

attempting to fasten laces or buckle clasps. But he was fully dressed when Earl James was announced. Eriand nodded permission for him to enter.

James appeared and said, "Well, you look better. Have a nice nap?"

Eriand glanced about at the abundant female flesh on display and said, "Quite nice, actually."

James laughed. "Gamina was not pleased to see so many beautiful young women in our suite, so they sent some handsome young men. She became very distressed when they offered to help her bathe." He glanced about. "I would call them a wanton people, but to them this is normal. To them, we must appear ... I don't know how we must appear."

Motioning Eriand to come with him, the Earl led the young man into a large hallway, where Locklear and Gamina were speaking. As they entered the hall,

same dress they had seen everywhere, the white kilt and sandals, came for them. But he also wore an ornate torque of gold and turquoise and carried a staff of office. "This way, Your Highness, m'lords, m'lady."

He led them down a long hall, where the entrances to vast chambers and apartments were alternated with open breezeways. Through the breezeways, fountains and small gardens would be illuminated by standards with torches placed atop them. As they passed many such gardens, James said, "You might as well get used to those naps, Highness. It's the custom here. Court business in the morning, the Empress and her privy officers,

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an afternoon meal, nap from after lunch to evening, court business from sundown to about the ninth hour, then supper."

Eriand glanced at several serving women passing by,

faced with marble and rose to a height of three stories over head. The walls on both sides of the hallway were painted with stylized renderings of great events and mythical battles between gods and demons. Down the center of the hall they walked, their feet treading on a carpet of fabulous design and weave, impossibly long, yet without apparent flaw.

Every twenty feet or so, a Keshian guard stood at the ready. Eriand noticed how little these men looked like the famous Dog Soldiers who manned the frontier with the Kingdom. These soldiers seemed to have been chosen for their appearance more than their experience, Eriand thought. Each wore only the short kilt, though of different design, cut away in front so that the legs might move more freely. Each man wore a breechcloth of the same white linen as the kilt, and an ornate belt fashioned of many colors, closed in front by a silver clasp. Each soldier wore the plain cross-gartered sandals, as well. Upon their heads were helms of fascinating design to Eriand, barbaric, primitive looking. One wore

James spoke aloud, "A grand display, isn't it?"

Eriand nodded. Nothing he had seen so far in the upper city of Kesh spoke of anything less than excess. In

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contrast with what they had seen in the lower city, it was even more overwhelming. In even the most minor detail, richness and opulence was the order of the day. Where something base could suffice, it was replaced by something noble: gold in place of common iron, gems in place of glass, silk where cotton would be expected. And after passing through more chambers and halls, he knew the same held true for the servants. If a man was needed, he not only must be fit and able, he had to be handsome. If a woman were to be seen walking through the halls, even by chance, then she must be lovely and young. A few more days of this, thought Eriand, and I'll welcome the sight of a plain face.

riand could see a vast hall, at least a hundred yards from where they stood to the opposite wall, and against that distant wall, a high dais rose, upon which sat a golden throne.

Out of the side of his mouth, Eriand said, "You didn't tell me it was a formal reception."

James said, "It isn't. This is a casual, intimate dinner."

"I can hardly wait for formal court." Taking a deep breath, Eriand said, "Well, then, let us take a bite with Her Majesty." Stepping forward. Prince Eriand led his advisors into the hall of the Empress of Great Kesh.

Eriand marched purposefully and directly down the center of the hall. The sound of boot heels cracking against the stone floor seemed alien, a loud and brash intrusion in this hall where the soft leather of sandals and slippers were the norm. Silence drank the noise, as no one in the hall spoke and all eyes were upon the

stare, and found the task impossible. Here, reclining upon cushions before the mightiest throne in the known world, was the single most powerful ruler in the known world. And she was a tiny, withered woman of unremarkable appearance. Her costume was similar to the customary short white kilt, though hers was long, reaching past the knees. Also her belt was studded with magnificent gems which caught the torchlight and sent sparkles dancing upon the walls and ceiling. She wore a loose vest of white fabric, clasped in front by a golden brooch set with a stunning pigeon's-blood ruby. Upon her head a diadem of gold rested, set with sapphires and rubies equal to any the Prince had ever seen before. The ransom of a nation rested upon the body of this old woman.

Her dusky skin couldn't hide the pallor of age. And her movements were those of a woman ten years moie than her seventy-five, but it was her eyes that made Eriand sense greatness, for they still had fire.

Eriand came to stand before the Empress and bowed his head, no more than he would do to his own uncle, the King. James, Gamina, and Locklear bent their knee, as they had been instructed by the protocol officel, waiting the signal to rise.

"How fares our young Prince of the Isles?"

The woman's voice was lightning cutting through a languid summer's afternoon, and Eriand almost jumped at the tone of it. That simple question contained nuances and meanings beyond the young man's ability to articulate. Overcoming an unexpected attack of panic, Eriand answered as calmly as possible, "Well, Your Majesty, my uncle, the King of the Isles, sends his wishes for your continued good health and well-being."

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With a chuckle, she answered, "As well he should, my

and saying, "Countess, would you do me the courtesy of approaching."

Gamina flashed a quick glance at James and then moved up the ten steps that put her before the Empress. "You of the North can be so fair, but I have never seen your like," said the old woman. "You are not from the area near Stardock, originally, are you?"

"No, Your Majesty," answered Gamina. "I was born in the mountains north of Romney."

The Empress nodded, as if this explained everything. "Return to your husband, my dear. Your looks are lovely in their exotic fashion."

As Gamina descended from the dais, the Empress said, "Your Highness, a table has been set aside for your party. You will do me the pleasure of dining with us."

The Prince bowed again and said, "It is our honor,

palace than the one in which his party was housed.

"If I may advise His Highness," came a voice from Eriand's right, and he turned to find that Kafi Abu Harez had insinuated himself between the Prince and Earl James. "Her Majesty, may she prosper, considered your potential for discomfort at so many new things and instructed me to sit at your side and answer whatever questions you might have."

And discover what it is we are curious about, came Gamina's thoughts.

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Eriand nodded slightly, and to Kafi it appeared he was merely considering this, but Gamina knew he was agreeing with her. Then the courtier cried, "The Princess Sharana!" Behind Awari came a young woman

Keshian sun. Her hair was cut at the forehead and shoulders, square and without fashion, but she wore a long braid in back, interwoven with gems and gold. Then the courtier shouted, "The Princess Sojiana."

Locklear almost came out of his seat. If the Princess Sharana was loveliness in its first bloom, then her mother, Sojiana, was beauty at its height. A tall woman of athletic stature, she moved like a dancer, each step designed to show her body to maximum advantage. And an exceptional body it was, long-limbed, flat stomach, and ample breasts. She had the look of fullness without hint of fat, of softness over firm muscle. She wore only the white kilt, with a golden girdle rather than the white belt. Around her arms two golden serpents coiled and around her neck she wore a golden torque set with fire opals, all of which set off her dusky tan skin. Her hair was the brown of wine-soaked wood, red as abundant as brown. And from a face as striking as her body, eyes of the most startling green regarded her

sion on his face, but the desertman seemed unwilling to speak. After enduring James's stare a moment, he took note of Locklear's rapt attention to the Princess as she came to stand before her mother, and at last said, "Lord

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Locklear, I feel the need to add a note of caution." He glanced back at the Princess Sojiana as she reached the dais, and whispered, "She is the most dangerous woman in their court after the Empress. And that makes her the second most dangerous woman in this world."

With a defiant grin, Locklear said, "I can well believe that. She is breathtaking. But I think I could rise to the challenge."

Gamina gave him a dark look at the crude joke, but the desertman forced a smile. "She may give you the opportunity. It is said her tastes are . . . adventure-some."

my mother well?" she asked in a formal tone.

"I am well, my daughter. We rule another day in Kesh."

The Princess bowed and said, "Then my prayers are answered." She then moved to sit beside her brother and daughter, and the servants entered the hall.

Dishes of remarkable variety were presented one after the other, and Eriand had to consider what to try every minute or two. Wines were brought forth, dry and sweet, red and white, the latter chilled by ice brought down from the peaks of the Guardian Mountains.

To the Keshian, Eriand said, "Tell me, then, why were the Imperial family members last to enter?"

Kafi said, "In the strange way we in Kesh do things, those of the least importance enter first, the slaves and

Eriand nodded, then found himself struck by an oddity. "That would mean his niece, Sharana, is—"

"Higher in rank in this court than the Prince," finished Kafi, glancing about the room. "This is something of a family dispute, my Prince."

And something he doesn't wish to speak of here, added Gamina. Eriand gave her a glance and she said, I'm not reading his thoughts. Highness. I would not do that with anyone who did not give me permission, but he's . . . announcing it. I can't explain it better, but he is straining to not speak about many things.

Eriand let it drop, and began asking questions about the court. Kafi answered in much the same way a bored history teacher might, save when questions could lead him into funny, embarrassing, or scandalous anecdotes. He was revealed to be something of a gossip.

old national rivalries, and age-old feuds were facts of Keshian court life, and the Empress kept her Empire intact by playing off one faction against another.

James sipped a fine dry red wine and considered what part they were to play in this drama, for he knew as certain as he knew boots hurt his feet that their presence would be seized upon by someone to further his own political ends. The question would be who would try the seizing and what his motives would be.

To himself, he added, not to mention how such a person would attempt to employ Eriand's presence in court. It was clear that at least one faction in court wanted Eriand dead and war between the Kingdom and the Empire. James glanced around the room, and then tasted the dry red wine again. As he savored it, he considered that he was a stranger in a very strange land and he would quickly have to learn his way around. He let his gaze wander, studying faces here and there and

and, he would do so when there were more guests to throw off suspicion and the effect of the death would do more to ruin the Empress's Jubilee. Unless, of course, he amended, it's the Empress herself who wishes Eriand dead.

He picked up a delicately seasoned piece of melon off his plate and ate it. Savoring the taste, he decided to let matters of state go for a few hours. But less than a minute later, he found his gaze wandering again about the room as he sought some clue, some hint of from where the next attack might originate.

Chapter Ten

Companion

The lookout pointed.

"Farafra!"

manded the Captain, and Borric turned the large ship's wheel to bring the ship to the indicated heading. Since joining the crew of *The Good Traveler*, he had earned the grudging respect of the Captain and crew. Some tasks he did well, while others he seemed to have no understanding of, but learned quickly. His sense of the ship, and shifts in current and wind, learned while sailing small boats as a boy, had earned him the job of helmsman, one of three sailors the Captain allowed the task.

Borric glanced upward, where Suli ran along a spar, negotiating the sheets and hawsers like a monkey. Suli had taken to the sea like one born to it. In the month they had been at sea, his child's body had put on a little bulk and muscle, made strong by constant exercise and the plain but filling food, hinting at the man he would be someday.

The Prince had kept his identity to himself, which probably wouldn't have mattered. After his lunatic be-

sinking, as if to know such things was to invite trouble.

From behind, the Captain said, "A Farafran pilot will take us into harbor. Bloody nuisance, but that's the way the Port Governor likes it, so we must heave to and wait." The Captain called out to reef sails and made ready to drop anchor. A pair of green and white pennants were run up, a request for a pilot. "Here's where you leave us, Madman. The pilot will be here within the hour, but I'm putting you over the side and will have you rowed to a beach outside the city."

Borric said nothing. The Captain studied the Prince's face and said, "You're a fit lad, but you were no kind of real sailor when you came aboard." His eyes narrowed as he said, "You know a ship like a sailing master knows one, not like crew; you knew nothing of the most common sailor's duty." As he spoke, the Captain kept glancing about, insuring everyone was performing his tasks as he should. "It's like you've spent your days upon the quarterdeck and never a minute below or aloft, a boy

pair to want out of Durbin in a hurry. No, the more I think on it, the less I wish to know. I can't say you've been a good sailor, Madman, but you've given your best, and been a fair deck hand with no complaining, and no man can ask for more." He glanced aloft, saw the sails were all in, and called out for the anchor to be dropped. Lashing the wheel while Borric held it steady, the Captain said, "Normally, I'd have you bursting your liver hauling cargo until sundown with the rest of the men, not counting your work for passage finished until then, but there's something about you which tells me trouble's following in your wake, so I'll have you oS and unnoticed." He looked Borric up and down. "Well, get

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below and get your things. I know you robbed my men blind with your card tricks. It's a good thing I haven't paid them yet, or you'd have all their earnings, as well as the rest."

inside and gathered together their few belongings. Besides the sheath knife and belt, Borric had won a smi, stake of coins, a pair of sailor's tunics, a second pair of trousers, and a couple of like pieces of clothing for Suli

By the time they emerged from below, the crew was idly standing around, waiting upon the arrival of the Farafran pilot. Several bade the two good-bye as they crossed to the rope ladder which hung off the lee side of the ship. Below, a small captain's boat waited, with two sailors to row them to shore.

"Madman. Boy!" said the Captain as they turned to descend the ladder. Both hesitated. He held out a tiny pouch. "It's a quarter wages. I'll not turn a man penniless into a Keshian city. It would be kinder to have left you to drown."

Suli took the pouch and said, "The Captain is kind and generous."

It was one of the two sailors who answered, before the boy could speak. "To be penniless in Kesh is to be a corpse. Madman." He shook his head slightly at Borric's ignorance. "Life is cheap in Kesh. You could be the bloody King of Queg and if you didn't have a coin upon you, they'd let you die in the street, step over you as

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they go about their business, and curse your soul to the Seven Lower Hells for your corpse being in the way."

Suli said. "It's true. Those of Kesh are animals."

Borric laughed. "You're of Kesh."

The boy spit over the side. "We of Durbin are not truly of Kesh, no more than the desert men. We have been conquered by them; we pay their taxes, but we are not Keshians." He pointed toward the city. "Those are not Keshians. We are never allowed to forget this. In the

another story yet to be proven to his satisfaction. The Brst said, "They ride in their chariots, and they think they're better 'en us. They'd kill you as soon as look at you." Both sailors pulled hard as they neared the breaker line, and Borric felt the boat rising on the back of a comber. The first sailor returned to his narrative. "And if one of 'em does kill ya, why the courts'11 just turn 'im loose. Even if'n he's just as common as you are, Madman. It's being trueblood."

The second sailor said, "That's fact enough. Watch yourself with the truebloods. They think different than the rest of us. Honor's different. If you challenge one, he m? "^^ht fight you, might not, won't care a fig about honor. But if he figures he's a grievance agin' you, why he tracks you, like you'd hunt an animal."

The first sailor added, "And he'll follow you to the edge of the world if he has to; that's a fact, too."

The breaker caught the boat and propelled it into the

anticipated, but at least we're alive"—he jiggled the pouch under his tunic—"have some means to eat, and are free of pursuit." He glanced back to where the ship waited for the Keshian pilot. He knew that sooner or later one of the seamen would mention the man and boy picked up outside of Durbin, and those who might be in this part of the Empire seeking news of him would connect that fact with his escape. Then the hunt would be on again. Taking a deep breath, Borric said, "At least no pursuit for the moment." Slapping the boy playfully upon the back, he said, "Come along and let's see what this Keshian city has to offer by way of a good, hot meal!"

To that prospect, Suli agreed vigorously.

Where Durbin had been crowded, dirty, and miserable, Farafra was exotic. And crowded, dirty, and miserable. By the time they were halfway to the center of the city, Borric understood exactly what the Captain had

, Borric looked around and said, "Doesn't the city watch or someone do something?" '

Suli was peering in every direction, constantly on the lookout for any opportunity to make a coin or two. Absently he said, "If some merchant nearby decides the stink is bad for business, he'll pay some boys to drag it to the harbor and toss it in. Otherwise it will lie there until it's no longer there." Suli seemed to take for granted that eventually some magic agency would dispose of the corpse.

A few feet away, a man in a robe squatted, ignoring those who passed by. As Borric watched, the man stood, and moved into the flow of traffic, leaving behind fresh proof he hadn't been squatting to say devotions to some god, but rather to answer the call of nature. "Gods

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above," said Borric. "Aren't there public Jakes in this

to get used to."

As they entered the flow of traffic from the docks into the city, Borric was astounded by the impossible variety of people. All manner of speech could be heard, and all fashions of dress could be observed. It was unlike anything he had seen before or expected to behold. Women passed by dressed in desert garb, covered from head to foot in plain blue or brown robes, nothing shown but their eyes, while a few feet away, hunters from the grassy plains stood inspecting goods, their dark, oiled bodies naked save for a simple thong breechclout, but their vanity showed in the copper bracelets, necklaces, and earrings they wore and in their choice of weapons. Clan tattoos marked faces here, and odd temple robes marked beliefs there. Women with skin as dark as morning's coffee passed wearing brightly colored cloth wrapped round from under-arm to knee, with high conical hats of the same cloth. Babies with serious eyes seemed to guard the rear from slings hung over their mothers' backs. Children of every possible description

much that was too new to comprehend. Everywhere he looked, hundreds of people moved by, going one way or another, some strolling, others hurrying, but all oblivious to the throng surrounding them. And more than the press of bodies and the constant babble of voices, there was the smell. Unwashed bodies, expensive perfumes, human excrement, cooking, exotic spices, animal odors, all filled his nose with the reek of this alien land. The street was packed, with little room to move without

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coming in contact with strangers. Borric was aware of the weight of his two purses in his tunic, as safe a place for them as he could manage. Any pickpocket was going to have to stick his arm down the front of Borric's shirt, which seemed unlikely. Borric felt his senses assailed, and he needed a respite.

They came to an open-front 'alehouse and the Prince motioned the boy to turn in. In the relative dark, they

"Clear the way!" A woman's shriek was followed by the clatter of hooves and more shouts, punctuated by the crack of a whip. Borric and Suli both turned to see what the fuss was. Before the open front of the ale-house, a strange scene was unfolding. A pair of splendid bay horses pulling an ornate chariot were rearing and whinnying as they were halted by their driver.

The cause of the sudden stop was a large man, who stood fore square in the center of the street. Behind the driver, the charioteer shouted, "Fool! Idiot! Get out of the way!"

The man in the street walked toward the two horses and grabbed the bridle of each. He clucked with the side of his tongue and pushed, and the horses moved backwards. The driver cracked his whip behind the ear of one of the horses, shouting loudly. But the horses obeyed the constant pressure from the front, rather than the noise from the back. The chariot was being backed up despite the driver's curses and protestation;-

The "large friend" was a mercenary soldier by his

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look, wearing leather armor over his green tunic and trousers. Upon his head rested an old metal helm, much dented and in desperate need of a wire brush and polish, and across his back was a leather sheath, containing what appeared to be a half-and-a-half-, or bastard-sword. Upon his sides, two long dirk handles showed weapons at his belt.

The man behind the chariot driver looked upon the man blocking his way in outrage. He was undressed, save for a white kilt and an odd weapons harness, crossed leather straps over his shoulders, forming an X across his chest. Spears were within easy reach of him, tied to the side of the chariot, looking like a boat's mast as they pointed straight up. A bow was also slung to the side of the vehicle. With his face turning crimson, the charioteer shouted, "Make way, you idiot!"

and spit. He forced the horses to retreat until the chariot began to turn to the right, backing into a pot dealer's small shop. The pot merchant shouted in alarm and jumped to get out of harm's way, but the man with the large sword ceased pushing the horses just short of wreaking havoc on the man's livelihood. The mercenary released the bridle and bent down to pick something up, then sauntered aside. "You can go now," he said.

The chariot driver was about to start the horses on their way again, when the charioteer pulled the whip out of his hand. As if anticipating the move, the warrior wheeled about as the leather lash sang through the air and let it catch upon a leather bracer he wore on his left arm. Quickly grabbing the whip, he yanked hard and almost pulled the charioteer over the side of his chariot. Then just as the man was regaining his balance, the mercenary drew one of his two long dirks and cut the lash. The charioteer fell backwards and almost went

pers.

Laughter filled the boulevard as the enraged charioteer called back curses upon the large warrior. The warrior watched the departing chariot, then entered the ale shop and came to stand beside Suli.

"Ale," he said, putting down what he had picked up in the street. It was a copper coin.

Borric shook his head. "You were almost run down because you stopped to pick up a copper?"

The man removed his metal helmet, revealing damp hair clinging to his head, where he had hair, for the man was at least in his forties or fifties and had lost most of the hair on top. "You can't take the chance of waiting, friend," he said slowly, his accent giving him a full-mouth sound as he spoke, as if he was speaking around cotton wadded in his cheeks. "That's five luni, it's more money than I've seen in a month."

Borric shrugged as if it really didn't matter. "Most recently from Durbin," he said. "But before that I was in Isles."

"Farafra isn't paradise, but it's a better place than that pest-hole Durbin." The man stuck out his hand "Ghuda Bule, caravan guard, late of Hansule, and before that Gwalin, and before that Ishlana."

Borric shook the man's hand, heavily callused from years handling both sword and livestock. "My friends call me Madman," he said with a grin. "This is Suli."

Suli solemnly shook hands with the fighter, as if one among equals.

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"Madman? Must be a story about that name, or didn't your father like you?"

their drivers give me gas. And one thing I do know about horses is that when someone is pushing on their faces, they don't like it and will back up. You can try that with a fool wiggling their reins and trying to flick a whip behind their ear, but I wouldn't try it with a rider on their back with a strong leg and a pair of spurs." He chuckled. "Pretty stupid, wasn't it?"

Borric laughed. "Yes, it was."

Ghuda Bule drained the last of the ale from his cup and said, "Well, best be off to the caravansary. My most recent woman threw me out of her crib this morning when she finally figured out I wasn't going to marry her and get a job in the city, after all. So, I'm without funds and that means time to find work. Besides, I've about had my fill of Farafra and could do with a change of scenery. Good day to you both."

Borric hesitated an instant, then said, "Let me buy you one."

Ghuda turned about as if looking to see where he was. "Well, first walk that way," he said, pointing down the street, "until you reach the southern tip of the Spires of Light—it's a large mountain range; you'll notice them right away. Then turn left to bend around them, then right where the River Sarn6 runs along the north tip of the Guardians. Follow the river to a place on the O\ ern Deep where a lot of people live, and that's the city of

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Kesh. Can't miss it. If you start now, you should get there in six or eight weeks."

"Thanks," said Borric drily. "I mean I need to get there and I'd like to hire on a caravan heading that way."

"Uh-huh," said Ghuda noncommittally, nodding.

Borric closed his eyes as if he had a headache. "Not quite."

"Look, friend, I thank you for the drink, but that doesn't entitle you to risk my good name by making recommendations that are bound to reflect badly on me in time."

Borric said, "Wait a minute! Who said it would reflect badly on you. I'm a competent swordsman."

"Without a sword?"

Borric shrugged. "That's a long story."

"It always is." Ghuda picked up his helm and put it crookedly upon his head. "Sorry."

"I'll pay you."

well patrolled by the army, so there's little pay, which is why there are always caravans needing guards. A large caravan, perhaps ten ecu. A small one, five. And food on the trip of course. Maybe a bonus if there are bandits along the way we have to fight."

Borric did a quick calculation in his head—he could only think in terms of Kingdom coins—and reviewed the money he had in his purse from Salaya and his poker winnings on ship. "I'll tell you what. Get the three of us

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hired on to guard a caravan and I'll double whatever is

paid you."

"Let me get this right: we get you on a caravan to

Kesh and you'll give me your wages when we get

there?" „

my word?"

"Doubt your word? Sonny, we've just met. And what would you think if you were me and this was being proposed to you by someone who's called 'Madman.' "

He looked significantly down at his empty cup.

Borric signaled for another round. "All right, I'll pay you half on account before we leave and the rest when we get there."

Ghuda still wasn't convinced. "And what about the boy? No one will consider him a likely guard."

Borric turned to look at Suli,,who was now clearly wobbling from the influence of three ales. "He can pass work. We'll hire him on to the caravan as a cook's monkey."

Suli just nodded, bleary-eyed. "Cook."

Borric grinned. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Ghuda stared at Borric a moment, then threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, that's good." Killing what was left of his ale, Ghuda pulled out his two long dirks, and reversed the one in his left hand, handing it to Borric. "Show me what you've got. Madman."

Suddenly Borric was twisting and parrying a vicious lunge, barely able to avoid a potentially killing stroke. He didn't hesitate as he struck the mercenary as hard a blow to the head as he could with his left hand. As Ghuda shook his head to clear it, Borric lunged, and the

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mercenary was falling away from the point, striking a table with his back.

The barman shouted, "Here you two! Stop breaking up my shop!"

convinced."

Borric flipped the dirk, catching the blade between thumb and forefinger, and handed it back to Ghuda.

The mercenary took it and said, "Well, we'd better find a weapons dealer and get you set up. You may know how to handle a weapon, but it does you little good if you don't have one."

Borric put his hand down the front of his baggy tunic and pulled out his purse. He took out a pair of copper coins and handed them to the furious barkeep. "Suli, let's be off—" He discovered the boy was slumped down at the foot of the bar, snoring loudly.

Ghuda shook his head. "Can't say as I trust anyone who can't hold his drink."

Borric laughed as he pulled the drunken boy to his feet. Shaking him severely, he said, "Suli, we have to go."

sick emerged from the ale shop.

Three hours later, two men and a very pale boy passed through the eastern city gate, and entered the caravansary. The large field, surrounded on three sides by tents and sheds, was located just to the east of the city, less than a quarter mile from the gates of Farafra. Close to three hundred wagons of varying sizes were

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spread around the meadow. Dust filled the air as horses, oxen and camels moved from one place to another.

Suli hefted the large sack he carried, full of various items Ghuda had insisted they buy. Borric had followed the mercenary's lead in the matter, save when it came to his own armor. Borric now wore an old but serviceable jacket of leather, with leggings and bracers. He couldn't find a light helm, so rather than one he didn't care for, he chose a leather band with a cloth

the city of Kesh.

As they moved along past the corrals where horses were kept, they came to the main concourse, a series of wagons arrayed in two lines. Strolling along between them were a full score of armed men, as well as merchants; chants seeking transport for their goods.

i Moving down the concourse, the three were called to

by a man atop each wagon. "Bound for Kimri. I need
i guards for Kimri!" At the next, a man shouted to them,
"Ghuda! I need guards for Teleman!" The third called,
"Top price paid. We're leaving tomorrow for Hansule!"

Halfway down the concourse, they found a caravan bound for the city of Kesh. The caravan master looked them over and said, "I know you by name, Ghuda Bule. I can use you and your friend, but I don't want the boy."
i ^ Borric was about to speak, but Ghuda cut him off. "I
(: don't go anywhere without my Good Luck Cook."

Luck Cook?"

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"When I was guard on Taymus Rioden's caravan from Querel to Ashunta, seven years back, we were raided by bandits. Struck as if by lightning. Had no time to even get out a prayer to the Death Goddess." He made a good luck sign, as did the caravan master. "But I survived as did my Good Luck Cook. Not another man did. I have always had my Good Luck Cook with me since."

"As that boy can be no more than twelve summers, Father of Prevaricators, he must have been precocious indeed to have been a caravan cook seven years ago."

"Oh, it wasn't him," said Ghuda, shaking his head as if that should be obvious. "Different cook. You see, I was down in the gully with my britches around my ankles with the worst case of runs in my life when the bandits struck. Couldn't even get up to fight. They just never

"I killed the bastard for almost poisoning me."

The caravan master couldn't help himself but laugh.

When he was through, Ghuda said, "The boy'll cause you no trouble. He can help the cook around the camp-fire at night and you needn't pay him. Just let him eat a full meal every day until we reach Kesh."

"Done!" said the master, spitting in his hand and extending it. Ghuda spit in his and they shook. "I Cc • always use a good liar around the fire at night. Make the journey pass quickly." To Suli he said, "Go find n;

cook, boy." He hiked his finger over his shoulder to where a cook wagon could be seen amidst a doze" freight wagons. "Tell him you're to be his new cook' monkey."

Suli looked to Borric, who nodded he should go. A Suli left, the caravan master said, "I am Janos Saber

Borric and Ghuda wandered from the spot, and found some shade under a widely spreading tree. Ghuda took his helm off and ran his hand over his sweaty face. "Might as well rest now, Madman. Tomorrow it gets really miserable."

"Miserable?" asked Borric.

"Yes, Madman. Today we're merely hot and bored. Tomorrow we will be thirsty, dirty, tired, hot, and bored."

Borric crossed his arms on his chest and tried to rest. He knew that it had been drilled into him since boyhood that a soldier steals rest whenever the opportunity appears. But his mind raced. How was Eriand faring and what was transpiring in Kesh? By his estimate, Eriand and the others should be in Kesh by now. Was

Chapter Eleven

Hunting

The lion stood motionless.

Eriand watched with interest as the cat waited with eyes fixed upon a grazing herd of grassland antelopes. Eriand sat on his horse, next to James and Locklear, and the desertman, Kafi Abu Harez. Arrayed nearby were a half-dozen chariots, the traditional centerpiece to Kesh's army. The Commander of the Imperial Charioteers, Lord Jaka, watched as his son Diigai made ready to hunt the cat. The elderly commander's face was set in stoic repose, as if carved from weathered black stone, showing no emotion at his son's approaching confrontation.

Kafi pointed to where the lion hunkered down in the tall grass. He said to Eriand, "This young male has no pride." Eriand took note of the huge animal, mrch

"Might he survive?" asked Locklear.

Kafi shrugged. "Most likely not. It is as the gods will. The boy may not leave the field unless he is disabled, which is much the same as death for one of his rank. His father is among the most important lords in the Empire, so to be reduced to the rank of a sah-dareen—a nonhunter—would be more shame than the family could endure and retain its influence. The boy would most likely go out and do something terribly foolish, and brave, but die nevertheless, to expiate the shame."

The lion padded forward silently, head low and eyes

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fixed upon his quarry. He had already marked a weak herd member, a young calf or a sickly old buck or doe. Then the wind shifted and, as one, the heads of the antelopes came up. Black noses twitched as the herd tested the wind for the scent of approaching danger.

lion picked up a new scent on the breeze and realized suddenly that he was no longer the predator but the prey.

At that moment, Diigai gave a shout and his driver cracked his whip and called for his horses to give pursuit. That was the signal, and the hunt was on. Borric and his companions put heels to their mounts and galloped to keep up with the chariots.

In a military maneuver, the chariots fanned out to intercept the lion if it broke right or left. Hunting calls filled the air as the young Keshian hunters cried ancient invocations of their hunting god, Guis-wa. Seen as a dark god in the Kingdom, the Red-Jawed Hunter was a major deity in Kesh and patron god of all Keshian hunters.

James said, "Just give that organized confusion a moment to get ahead of us that's all. I wouldn't want you to find yourself in front of it accidentally."

Eriand was about to protest, then realized what James was telling him. It was the sort of scene that would lend itself to an "accident." He nodded, and turned his mount, bringing her to a canter, fast enough

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to see what was occurring ahead without the risk of being caught up in the hunt.

Suddenly the chariots were reining in, giving Diigai ample room to face the lion. By the time Eriand's party caught up, Diigai was off his chariot, stalking the lion

herd, but to be a great hunter—a simbani—to have a lion's-main headdress for formal occasions, you must use the weapons of your ancestors."

Eriand nodded and moved his horse next to Diigai's chariot. His driver, a boy of about the same age, looked oh anxiously, obviously concerned for the young noble's safety. The young hunter was now about fifty yards ahead of his chariot, halfway to where the lion crouched.

The lion crouched, his tongue lolling in his mouth as he panted to catch his breath. His eyes darted and his head turned as he attempted to determine if danger was approaching and if so from where. Then he reared up on his haunches and looked around. There was no avenue of escape, as a ring of chariots stood ready to block his flight on all quarters. Then he spied the approaching figure. The lion roared a scream of anger and fear.

That made sense to Ertand, as much as any of this barbaric ritual made sense. To hunt down lions, bears, wolves, and wyverns that were raiding herds made sense. To hunt something you couldn't eat so you could wear its head as a trophy, didn't.

Then the lion charged. A slight sound of surprise escaped the lips of several of the charioteers, and it was obvious to Eriand and his companions this was unusual behavior for this breed of lion. Diigai hesitated, and in that instant he lost his opportunity to be ready. His spear was incorrectly set when the lion charged and he gave it only a glancing blow. Suddenly all was confusion: the boy was knocked back, his shield saving him a terrible raking as the lion lashed out blindly at the source of his pain. Then the animal was biting at his flank, as if some enemy was biting him there. The young man's spear protruded from his side.

"He'll be killed!" Eriand shouted.

Kafi said, "No one will interfere. It's his right to kill or be killed." The desertman shrugged. "I don't see much logic in it myself, but it is the trueblood way."

Suddenly, Eriand pushed back in the saddle, kicking his legs out of his stirrups. He reached under the right knee roll and quickly unbuckled his right stirrup leather. Pulling it free of the saddle, he rebuckled it, and pulled his left stirrup iron up so it wouldn't strike his horse. Eriand wrapped the leather of his right stirrup around his right hand twice, swung the heavy iron in his hand to test the weight and how far he could strike with it. James began to say, "What are you—" but before the question was finished, Eriand had his horse off toward the young hunter.

The lion crouched and snarled, and began to move at a fast crawl, keeping low until the moment to spring, but as he neared the young man who held his shield to

The big cat began to move after, then remembered there was another enemy to face.

Eriand's distraction was enough. Diigai sprinted to where his spear lay, and made ready. As Eriand returned to his companions, the young Keshian noble shouted his hunter's cry and the lion turned. Crazed with pain and confused with the attacks from all quarters, the young cat sprang at Diigai. This time the spear was correctly set and it took the lion full in his massive chest. His own momentum carried the lion forward, driving the spearhead into his heart.

The charioteers shouted and the young man stood over the twitching cat. Eriand turned his horse, who was shying at the smell of blood. It took a moment to control him without stirrups, but being an excellent horseman, the Prince quickly had the mount turned and trotting away from the shouting trueblood men. A chariot approached and Eriand found LordJaka passing

leathers and irons and said, "Are you mad? What possessed you to do something that foolish?"

Eriand said, "He would have been killed. The others would have then killed the lion. Now only the lion is dead. Made sense to me."

"And if your horse had shied a moment earlier, you could have been the lion's first victim!" James grabbed Eriand's tunic and pulled him almost off his horse as he drew him closer. "You are not some stupid son of a nameless noble. You are not the idiot child of a wealthy merchant. You are Isles' next King, for mercy's sake. If you ever try anything that foolish again, I will personally beat you within an inch of your existence."

Eriand pushed James's hand away. "I haven't forgotten that." Eriand circled his horse, anger on his face. "I

said, "The boy's not making it easy, is he?"

James shook his head. "It's the sort of thing you or I would have tried at his age."

Locklear said, "Were we really that stupid?"

"I'm afraid so, Locky." James glanced around.

"They're taking the lion's head, so we'll be heading back to the palace. And they'll be inviting us to another celebration."

Locklear grimaced. "Has anyone ever told these people that it's acceptable for less than fifty people to eat together at one time?"

"Apparently not," answered James, kicking his horse into motion.

"Let's go soothe our Prince's wounded pride," said Locklear.

Together, the two advisors approached the waiting Kafi Abu Harez, who turned his mount and joined in with them to ride back to the city. As they left the celebrating Keshians, Locklear asked, "Kafi, what has Eriand done by taking a hand?"

The desertman said, "I do not know, my lord. Had your young Prince killed the lion, then he would have not only shamed Diigai by showing the world the boy could not hunt, he would have made a powerful enemy in Lord Jaka. As it is, he only distracted the animal, allowing the boy to regain his weapon and kill the cat." Kafi shrugged and smiled as he spurred his horse to a

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canter, along with James and Locklear. "Perhaps nothing will come of this. With the trueblood, who can say?" James said, "I'm sure we'll find out soon enough." They rode the rest of the journey back to the city in

nothing he would call love for the young Keshian servant, but with her he felt the comfort of being able to relax and speak of what bothered him. She seemed to know when to stay silent or when to ask the probing question that cleared up his own confusion. And their lovemaking had progressed from the excitement of newness and raw clashing of desire to a more sedate familiarity of two people who understood one another's need.

Another servant entered and said, "Highness, the Lord James-asks permission to enter."

Eriand felt like refusing, but realized he would have to speak with James sometime today, so he nodded once. A moment later, James entered the bathing room.

James looked down upon the nude pair, and if he was startled to discover the girl with Eriand, he hid it. He didn't ask anything of the servant who remained in the room, but removed his cloak and handed it to the young

"Who are you mad at, Eriand?"

For a silent moment the frustration was clearly etched on the young man's face. Then it seemed to wash away as Miya continued to probe at the knots of tension in his neck and shoulders.

"The universe, I guess. The gods of fate and chance.

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You My father. Everyone." Then his voice fell away.

"Mostly I'm furious with Borric for getting himself

Tames nodded. "I know. I feel that way, too."

Eriand let out a long sigh of tension released and said, "I guess that's why I did what I did. I just couldn't see that boy killed by that lion. Maybe the boy's got a brother—" Words failed him as tears came unbidden. For a moment, Eriand sat in the warm pool, his grief

James could only shake his head. "Why? Only the gods know and they aren't talking. At least not to me." He reached down and stuck his hand into the water. A moment later he withdrew it and wiped his brow. "Some things make sense, others don't. I don't know."

James was reflective a while, then said, "Look, I've not told you this. Your father saved my life. A couple of times. Now I'm no more an expert on why a Prince of Isles should save the life of a boy thief than I am on why another Prince of Isles should die in an ambush on the way to a birthday party. I can only tell you that no one ever told me, ever told me, that life makes sense. It just is."

Eriand sank back against Miya's soft body and let warmth infuse him. He sighed and felt something leave from within, an ache that had been there every minute since the ambush. "It's so odd," he said quietly. "It just hit me now that Borric must be dead. Yet ..."

feel it. Do you know what I mean?"

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James got up. "I think so. At least, I think I know as much as anyone can who has never had one in their life to be as close with as you two were with each other. But I've watched you since you were babies and I've seen you fight and play. I think I know what you mean."

Eriand sighed again. "I just thought it would feel different. That's all. It's not like he's dead, you know just very far away." Eriand's eyes got heavy and he closed them. A moment later his breathing became more regular and he dozed.

James motioned for the servant who held his cloak to return it. To Miya he said, "We dine with the Empress again, tonight. Wake him when it's time?"

She nodded, not speaking so as not to wake the sleep-

tall warrior entered. Miya moved a discreet distance away, out of earshot but close enough should Eriand need her.

Jaka bowed before Eriand, then said, "My lord Prince, I trust I have not come at an inopportune minute?"

"No, Lord Jaka. I was just finishing my dressing in anticipation of dining with your Empress."

Jaka made a gesture with both his hands, held parallel and moving them downward and out, the meaning of which Kafi had told him was, "May heaven protect," or "May heaven give bounty," an all-purpose benediction.

The old warrior said, "I have come to speak to you of this thing you did this afternoon."

"Yes?"

"There are those who will say that you robbed my son of a courageous death, or that his kill is tainted because of your interference."

Here it comes, thought Eriand. He had half-expected something like this.

"Yet," continued Jaka, "you did but annoy the animal, distracting it long enough for my son to recover his spear."

Eriand nodded. "The kill was his."

"This is true. So, while I am partially mixed in my feelings as to the elegance of the kill, as a father of a boy I love deeply, I wish to thank you for allowing him his manhood." Softly he added, "And for saving his life."

Eriand stood motionless an instant, struggling with what he should say. Then he took the course that would

attacks the shield, the experienced hunter lets him and attempts to recover the spear. It is a thing we teach, though in the heat of the moment, it is easily forgotten. Easily forgotten. Your Highness.

"I must leave, my lord Prince. But before I do, know that should you have need, I am in your debt."

Eriand could think of nothing appropriate to say to such a straightforward offer of thanks, so he merely said, "Thank you for the courtesy of your call, and the honor of your presence. Lord Jaka."

The Commander of the Imperial Charioteers bowed to Prince Eriand and departed. Eriand turned to where Miya stood, and said, "I will see you later this evening, I expect."

Miya came to Eriand and stood a moment, adjusting his tunic, more for the closeness it brought than for any

of She Who Is Kesh are occasionally permitted to share the glory of the Empress's court."

"Good. I will see you there."

Eriand motioned for the doors to his apartment to be opened and two young women swung them wide. Outside, four Krondorian Palace Guards stood waiting, in formal uniform. They fell in around Eriand, and in lock step they marched down the large halls of the palace.

Along the route, they were joined by James and Gamina, then Locklear, and finally Lord Kafi. When they reached the Imperial complex of the palace, the Krondorian Guards halted, as it was not permitted for soldiers of a foreign nation to approach the Imperial presence.

Eriand entered to the fanfare of trumpets. Leading his small band, as senior most in rank he was required to address the Empress first. The Keshian Master of Cere-

rather than endure state dinners with their parents.

Reaching the foot of the dais, Eriand bowed and the Master of Ceremonies, said, "O She Who Is Kesh, I have the honor of presenting to you His Highness, Prince Eriand, Heir to the Throne of the Kingdom of the Isles, Knight-Captain of the Western Realm."

Eriand stood upright and said, "Your Majesty, I thank you for the kindness of sharing your bounty with myself and my companions. May I present—" and he went through the formality of presenting his companions, as he had each time they had come before the Empress.

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He wondered if this nonsense went on at every meal of the day for the Empress.

The Empress said, "Your Highness had a busy day, from all reports." Eriand waited for her to say more, but

ing. The young man who had spat began to move on, when Eriand turned and said, "You!"

All eyes turned to watch the two young men. The young man looked at Eriand with narrow eyes. He was a trueblood, probably an important noble's son, given his proximity to the Prince, and his body was muscular and strong. Eriand smelled a fight coming, and was in no mood to avoid it.

"Eriand!" James's voice hissed in the Prince's ear.

"Back off!"

The Empress watches, came Gamina's warning.

Eriand glanced at the throne as the young noble came to stand before him. The Empress's attention was riveted upon the two who stood facing each other. A court noble moved to intercede, and the Empress ordered him to her side. She seemed disinclined to interfere. Rather, there was an avid glint in her eye. Eriand

A few voices could be heard muttering. In this court, to be a nonhunter was to be less than noble, and to be called such was a deadly insult.

Eriand glanced at Prince Awari, to see if he would interfere. The Prince looked on, interest in his eyes, and a slight smile upon his lips. Eriand then knew the young man had insulted him at Prince Awari's bidding. Eriand took a breath, then as quickly as he could, he brought

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his hand across his chest, and delivered a punishing back-handed blow to the young man's face.

The youth staggered as his knees buckled. He collapsed to the floor, but before he could complete the fall, Eriand grabbed the ornamental torque around his throat and lifted him by it.

"He who insults me in Kesh's court insults the King-

But the young man only said, "I do not understand what you mean."

Eriand said, "I've struck you. You have the right to name the weapons we shall use when we duel."

The young man's face knotted in an expression of unfeigned perplexity. "Duel? Why would I fight you? You would surely kill me."

Eriand did not know what to say. He was spared the need of saying anything by the Empress. "Lord Kilawa."

A man of middle years stood up, at a table located near the back of the room. "My Empress's command?"

"Your son is a buffoon, Kilawa. He insults a guest in my house. What is to be done with him?"

The man's face went pale. But he stood erect as he

Instantly, the youth who had insulted Eriand bowed his head toward the Empress. "Your Majesty?"

"The sight of you causes me discomfort. You are banished from the upper city. Never set foot upon the plateau so long as the light shines from my eyes. When I have gone to the Hall of Eternal Beauty, then the one who rules after me may prove merciful and allow your

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return. That is as much forbearance as you'll get from g_and only because your father is dear to me—I don't have much mercy left in my bitter old bones.

Now, begone!"

When he reached the table set aside for his party, Eriand turned to Kafi and said, "What was that about?"

The desertman seemed uncertain of the question.

They are hunters. Warriors are little more than dogs to be turned loose upon an opponent. Oh, they'll fight if necessary and with ferocity, but they count no honor in it. No, honor is in the ability to track down your prey, to bring it to bay, and kill it with a single blow. That is honor to a trueblood. For young Rasajani to fight you would be unreasonable. You are a warrior of undoubted talents. You would quickly kill him. He knew that, so to fight you would be sheer folly."

Eriand shook his head as he said, "This is a difficult thing to understand."

Kafi shrugged. "To them it is difficult to understand how a man would allow circumstances to force him into fighting someone he knew was a finer warrior over a matter of honor. It is, from their point of view, tantamount to suicide."

The party of Princess Sharana entered, and walking a step back was Miya. Eriand drank in the sight of the

Kafi said, "Of course not, Highness. The Empress would not allow slaves nor 'inferiors' such as myself to attend your personal needs in your own quarters." The word inferiors snarled with barely hidden bitterness. "So only young men and women of noble birth—lesser

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sons and daughters—may serve the Empress and her guests."

Now Eriand's eyes grew round. "All of them!"

Kafi said, "Yes, every servant in your chamber is a daughter of nobility." He waved absently at the others around the table, who were watching Eriand's discomfort. "Of course all in your apartment, Your Highness, are related to the Empress and of royal blood."

Eriand said, "Gods and demons. I've bedded half the

bitterness in the last observation.

As protocol dictated, the Princess Sojjiana and her retinue were the last to enter, and she made formal enquiry as to her mother's health. The forms were met as required, and the meal commenced.

Servants appeared when the Princess's party was seated and the dinner began. Little talking occurred around Eriand's table, as both the Prince and Locklear seemed content to stare across the room, Eriand at Princess Sharana and Lady Miya, and Locklear at their mother.

Later that evening, James requested Eriand accompany Gamina and himself upon a stroll through one of the many palace gardens. Assuming there was a reason for the odd request, the Prince agreed.

As they were entering the garden, Gamina's voice entered Eriand's mind. James asks that you speak

agent in the palace.

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Finally? Has there been a problem?

A problem? There was a feeling of humor with James's answer. Only that we're under constant supervision. Half the "servants" in our quarters are most likely Keshian spies—which is a faint differentiation, as anything we do would be reported as a matter of course by those who are not spies. I think something very important is happening.

Eriand asked Gamina how her day passed, and they chatted about inconsequential things, as they found a magnificent marble water fountain: three demons of comic aspect seemed to be trapped in motion, and above them beautiful nude women hunted them from chariots. Water poured out of the rear of the three chariots as the demons were herded toward the center

I'm not sure yet, answered James. I've pieced together this much. The Empress's health fails. She is more ill than is apparent. That is common gossip in the palace and the city below. What isn't known is that she is expected to name Prince Awari her heir, but every sign points to her naming Sojjiana, or even Sharana, before her own son. The Empress and her son have had differences for years and at times have barely spoken.

So there's a question of inheritance of the throne?

Apparently, answered James. The throne usually passes to the eldest child.

"Lovely night," said Eriand aloud. But that's Sojjiana.

True, but there is a major faction of nobles who would see Awari upon the throne. First because the last two rulers have been women, and many of the subject nations of Kesh are fiercely patriarchal and fear that three women rulers in a row might turn Kesh into a matriar-

and Masters, their equivalent to our own Congress of Lords. But others fear her as being . . . dangerous. She is able to manipulate Awari and other lords . . . enough so that if Awari is named the next Emperor, she could still cause difficulties in the Gallery.

Does this have anything to do with the attempt^ . . . the killing of my brother? "Let's see what other marvels this garden offers."

"Yes," said Gamina. "It is so lovely here."

James said, "For a while. I fear we have a terribly busy day tomorrow. It is the official welcome and beginning of the-Jubilee. All the rulers of the Empire will be here and gathered together for the first time. We must look our best."

James's thoughts then came to Eriand. It possibly has something to do with the attack in the desert. Awari's faction is very strong in the heart of the Empire, while

so it's unlikely the Empress would risk an open breach by giving him command. No, the Prince would be the only binding figure they would all follow without question. Also, another lord wishes preeminence in the Gallery.

Who? asked the Prince.

Lord Ravi, Master of the Brothers of the Horse. But he is not trueblood, and while his cavalry units are critical for the success of any move against us the Empire might make, they lack the prestige of the charioteers.

You paint a picture of a court in shambles.

Perhaps, but remember, as long as the Empress rules, all obey her. It is possible that when she does die, chaos, even civil war, may come. But whoever is trying to start

There was silent agreement.

Chapter Twelve

Evasion

Borric pointed.

"What in the world is that?" asked Ghuda.

The caravan was traveling the well-used Imperial highway from Farafra to Kesh, passing through miles of farm land. The journey had proven uneventful, until now.

To the north of the road, three men on horseback were attempting to capture another man on foot, a strange-looking fellow wearing an unadorned knee-length yellow robe. His head was shaved in the fashion of monks, but his garment was unlike any of those worn

All this was accomplished despite the fact he carried a wooden staff and a rucksack of some size slung over one shoulder, its cloth broadband across his chest. He ran, laughing and chattering nonsense to torment his would-be captors. The insane caper had Ghuda and Borric laughing. One of the riders turned at the sound and the humor seemed to enrage him more.

The rider pulled a club of exotic fashion and rode at the dancing man, attempting to strike him, but the man ducked under the blow, rolling on the ground, and before the first rider could turn the horse, he was up and dancing again. He turned his backside to all three and wiggled it, making a flatulent noise to show his contempt for the three.

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"Who are they?" asked Borric, laughing at the comedy.

Ghuda said, "That cavorting character is an Isalani by

fashion, despite a wide variation in dress; one wore buckskin breeches, no shirt, and a leather vest, while another was dressed in leather armor, and the third favored cavalier boots, an ornate shirt, and a hat with a plume. Each man had his hair bound back, tied off with a ring set with a feather and allowed to fall in a long tail, down to mid-back, but with two long ear locks left free.

"What do you think this is about?"

Ghuda shrugged. "With an Isalani, who can tell? They're mystics—seers, shamans, fortune-tellers, and visionaries; they are also the biggest bunch of thieves and swindlers in Kesh. He probably bilked those three." , With a shout of frustration, one of the men drew a sword and swung in earnest at the Isalani. Borric jumped off the wagon, which was moving slowly as the road was gently rising into the foothills of the Spires of Light, and Janos Saber, the caravan master, was keeping his horses to a slow walk to preserve them. Saber shouted, "Madman, get back to your wagon! Leave this

The odd-looking man on foot didn't halt his dodging and ducking for an instant, but one of the horsemen—the one with the plumed hat—turned and shouted, "Stay out of this, stranger."

"I know your temper grows short, friend, but using a sword against an unarmed man seems excessive."

The rider ignored him and spurred his horse with a shout, riding directly at the Isalani. Another rider had begun a similar attack, and instantly the Isalani was

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moving between the two. The first rider veered, and realized too late he had made the wrong decision. As the Isalani danced away, the two horses collided, and as horses will, one decided it was time to bite the other, which resulted in the second horse deciding it was time

turned sideways at the last instant. He dodged in his saddle as the Isalani attempted to dislodge him with his staff. The rider avoided being dumped by the Isalani, who stood to his left, but suddenly found strong hands on his tunic, reaching up from the right side. Borric pulled the rider out of his saddle, and half-tossed, half-pushed him to where the other two were regaining their feet.

"That was a mistake," said the first rider, who had a longsword out and ready. And from his expression as he advanced, he meant to have blood.

"Well," said Borric, getting ready for the fight as the other two riders turned their attention to the armed mercenary, "it wouldn't be the first one I've made." Under his breath he said, "Let's hope it's not the last one."

The first warrior raced forward, attempting to overwhelm Borric by surprise. Borric adroitly stepped aside,

plumed hat circling to the right, and the man in the leather vest moving left, forcing Borric to guard two quarters from attack. Borric began talking to himself, a habit Eriand had been poking fun at since they were

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bovs. "If A®^ have tne brains of a pound of pepper, the lout on my right will feign an attack while the thug on

the left comes at me."

Suddenly Borric took the fight to them, pulling his parrying dirk and springing left, moving the off-side attack back. He was instantly around as the man who had been on his right attempted to seize the opportunity presented by an exposed back. But at the moment he sought to strike a blow, Borric spun and took the blow upon his dirk, counterthrusting a second later, delivering a serious stomach wound to the man in the ornate shirt and cavalier boots.

The rider approached the Prince warily. What he had seen told him he indeed faced a very skilled warrior. The two men circled one another, not sparing any attention for anything else. Then the Prince saw a pattern of steps. Softly to himself, Borric said, "Step, slide, step, slide, cross over. Come on, you beauty, repeat it. Step, slide, step, slide, cross over." Borric grinned, and when the man again cross stepped, Borric leaped to the attack. The slight turning of the body was the opening Borric needed. He drove the man back with a furious combination of slashing blows and thrusts with the dirk.

Then the rider countered and took the offensive, and Borric found himself being driven back. Cursing the fate that put a longsword in his hand instead of a rapier, he attempted to parry and regroup. Muttering under his breath, he said, "This bastard is good!"

For what couldn't have been more than five minutes, but seemed hours to Borric, the two men evenly traded blows, answered every thrust with a counterthrust, ev-

Then there was a lull, as both men stood in the hot afternoon sun gasping for breath, the only sound the buzzing of flies and the rustle of wind in the tall prairie grass. Borric gripped the hilt of his sword tightly, feeling fatigue begin to nip at him. Now the struggle was becoming more dangerous, for beyond issues of skill, both men were weary, and fatigue could cause a fatal mistake. Seeking to end it, Borric leaped forward with a high blow to the head, followed by a snap blow toward the man's legs. But even with the advantage of being able to parry with his dirk and free himself from the need of protecting his left with his sword, he still could not gain enough of an edge to bring the contest to an end.

Back and forth the advantage swung, first to Borric, then the plainsman, but each man successfully took the other's measure. Perspiration ran down the plainsman's bare chest and drenched Borric's shirt, making fingers unsure on hilts. Breath came in ragged pants as the sun

faced as good a swordsman as he had ever seen, one perhaps with less native ability than the Prince, but one with a great deal more experience.

For a moment, they paused, each man facing the other, both crouched, panting for breath as exhausted bodies trembled with fatigue and tension. Both men knew the first to make a mistake would now be the one to die. Borric drew in gasping breaths of air, trying to find one last reserve of energy. He stared at his opponent, knowing the man did the same. Neither man wasted breath on conversation, as each waited for the moment when enough strength would return to press the attack again. Then, with a loud intake of breath, the plainsman rocked forward on his feet, gave out a cry of

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anser, and forced himself to a running charge. Borric sidestepped and brought his sword and dirk up, to block the cut, then he drove his knee into the man's stomach.

Borric had gotten too close, and the man had hooked his heel with his foot. Now Borric was on the ground and rolling, seeking to get clear and regain his feet. Spinning around, Borric came to his knees, only to find the point of a sword coming at his face. Then another sword interposed itself, and the first blade was knocked away.

Borric looked up into the bright glare of the sky and saw Ghuda standing with his hand-and-a-half sword interposed between the two combatants. "If you two boys are finished . . . ?" he said.

The horseman looked up and the fight seemed to drain away from him. It was obvious that a fresh opponent stood ready to act if he continued being combative, and from Ghuda's appearance and the size of the sword he carried, one willing and able to cause much damage. Borric relented by simply holding up his hand and waving it weakly. The rider backed away a few

bleeding to death. It would probably be to his benefit if you got him to a surgeon.

"And you," he said, turning to Borric, "had better look down the road to see where you're supposed to be instead of larking about with these silly children."

Borric watched the other swordsman turn his attentions to his friends. The man with the leg wound he

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helped to his feet, and they both examined the man who was wounded in the stomach.

"Where's that capering lunatic?" asked Borric, taking another drink of water.

"I don't know," said Ghuda quizzically. "I lost track of him when I stepped in between you two prodigies "

Putting away his large sword, Ghuda motioned for the younger swordsman to give him his hand, and as he helped Borric up, one of his big gloved fists struck Borric in the side of the head, driving him back to the ground.

Shaking his ringing head, Borric said, "What was that for?"

Ghuda shook his fist at Borric, "For being a stupid son of misery! Damn it, boy, it's so you'll learn to act like a responsible guard and do your job! It could have been an ambush, couldn't it?"

Borric nodded, and said, "Yes, I suppose it could."

Borric got to his feet unaided and Ghuda motioned for the Prince and the boy to come along. As they stepped onto the road, Borric said, "I just wish people would stop thinking the best way to teach is to beat the

"You kept trying to skewer that fool, and with the longsword that's a bit of a task. No damn point, and unless you grab the forte with your off hand and really drive the thing, all you'll do with the point against an armored opponent is irritate him. You missed a half-dozen chances to hand that bloke his head, if you ask me. If you're going to live a long life, you'd better learn

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to use a sword with an edge on it, as well as one of those Krondorian pig-stickers."

Borric smiled. The rapier had never been a popular weapon until his father, as fine a swordsman as ever held a sword, had become Prince. Then it had become fashionable, but obviously not south of the Vale of Dreams. "Thanks. I'll practice with it."

"Just don't pick an opponent who's quite so determined to kill you next time." Looking down the road at

drank lots of water and fruit juice, as did Ghuda and Suli, but still found himself weakening quickly in the heat. He wondered how much was due to his brush with death in the Jal-Pur Desert.

Cresting the hill, they saw the caravan of Janos Saber moving sedately down the road. And sitting on the end of the last wagon was the Isalani, feet dangling off the tailgate, as he ate a big, bright orange. Ghuda pointed and Borric shook his head. "He's the clever one, isn't he?"

Ghuda started trotting down the road, and Borric forced himself to do likewise, though his arms and legs felt like damp cotton. After a few minutes, they overtook the last wagon and Borric managed to pull himself up on the tailgate, while Ghuda climbed up next to the driver, and Suli scampered ahead to the cook wagon.

Borne let out a long sigh, then took a good look at the man he had rescued from the three plainsmen. The

narrow slits as he grinned at Borric, and his skin was a golden hue, a color Borric had only seen a few times on some citizens of LaMut who were of Tsurani heritage. With a merry note in his gravelly voice, the Isalani said, "Want an orange?"

Borric nodded and the strange-looking man took one out of the rucksack he had been so fiercely hanging on to during the encounter with the three riders. Borric peeled back the orange and pulled out a wedge and sucked the sweet juice from it, while the odd man handed another one up to Ghuda. The old caravan guard asked, "What was all that about back there?"

The man shrugged, his grin staying in place. "They think I cheated them at cards. They were very angry."

"Did you?" asked Borric.

Ghuda said, "The Blue Rider?"

An emphatic nod yes was followed by, "At times I have been known to ride about on a fine black steed of most impressive conformation, dressed in robes of the finest weave died vivid blue. I am very famous in some places."

"But this is not one of those places," said Ghuda.

"Alas, no. Here I am relatively unknown. However, at those times when I have my blue finery and my fine steed, then I quickly gain fame wherever I pass, for there are few who rival my beauty."

Borric regarded the faded orange robe and said, "I take it this is not one of those times."

"Again I must say alas, for this also is so. My horse died, which made riding him most difficult, and the

tempt to cheat me. I deal honestly with those who are honest with me. The difficulty, usually, is in finding honest men."

Borric nodded, amused by this strange little man.

"And how many honest men have you dealt with

lately."

Nakor shrugged, an exaggerated moving of the shoulders with a slight bobbing of his head. "None, so far. But I still have high hopes one day of meeting such a one."

Borric shook his head and laughed, as much at himself for going to the trouble of saving this lunatic as he was at the lunatic.

When night approached, the wagons were circled

For some reason, he didn't seem to be in the least bit troubled by the Isalani's having joined his caravan unasked. Borric was reasonably certain the strange little man had somehow bemused the usually stern caravan master, but that suggested the little man had some magic power or another. Unless he was a confidence trickster of sufficient guile to run his confidence game while on the back of a moving wagon five vehicles behind the one upon which his victim rode. Borric thought that even his uncle Jimmy wouldn't claim being that good.

At thought of James, he was once again visited with the frustration of his situation. How to safely reach the palace of the Empress and get word to James he was still alive? The facts learned at the Governor of Durbin's house showed that important men, placed very highly in the Imperial house, were involved with this plot on his life. And the closer he got to the palace, he was certain, the more difficult it would be to reach.

to alertness. "Your duty. Madman."

Borric rose and assumed his post with another two guards, each spaced a third of the way around the perimeter, with the muttering and oaths appropriate to such men in similar situations throughout history.

"Jeeloge!" called Ghuda.

Borric levered himself up on his arm, peering between Ghuda and the teamster who drove the wagon, and looked to where the older guard pointed. As the extra guard at this end of the caravan, he could get away with laying atop bales of silk imported from the Free Cities, dozing in the afternoon sun. A town appeared upon the horizon as they crested a hill. It looked to be of good size. In the Kingdom, it might even count as a small city, but Borric had long since discovered that in relation to Kesh, the Kingdom was sparsely populated. The Prince returned to his doze. They would lay over for the night in Jeeloge before continuing on to Kesh,

now why caravan duty in the interior of Kesh was considered a low-risk profession. Things tended toward the quiet this close to the capital of the Empire.

"I wonder what that's all about?" mused Ghuda.

Borric looked up and saw a company of mounted men had set up an inspection point near the edge of the town. Moving to the far right so he could speak in Ghuda's ear without the driver overhearing, Borric whispered, "They may be looking for me."

Turning toward the younger guard, Ghuda's eyes almost blazed in anger as he said, "Isn't that interesting?"

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Do you have any other wonderful news I should know about before I'm hauled into an Imperial court?" His angry tone cut through his whisper. "What did you do?"

"No, of course not."

Ghuda's narrow eyes searched Borric's for a long moment, then he said, "Of course you didn't." With a big sigh, he said, "We could take a band of ragged bandits, if bump came to push, but if push came to shove, those Imperials would have us trussed up like a game bird for the table in less time than it takes to tell about it. Tell you what: if you're asked, you're my cousin from Odoskoni."

"Where is Odoskoni?" asked Borric as the wagons drew near the horsemen.

"A little town in the Peaks of Tranquillity, nearest city is Kampari. You have to go through a hundred miles of the Green Reaches to get there, so few do. Very little chance of any of these boys having been within a year's march of the place."

pany wore a splendid tunic of red silk, a metal helm with a fur band around the base—this company's being leopard skin. Each held a lance and had a sword at his side and a bow slung behind the saddle. Borric agreed with Ghuda's assessment. The men of the company had the look of seasoned veterans. Whispering in Ghuda's ear, Borric said, "Doesn't Kesh have any green troops?"

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Ghuda whispered back. "Many, Madman. The cemeteries are full of them."

The officer spoke to Saber. "We're looking for a pair of runaway slaves, from Durbin. A young man, perhaps twenty years of age and a boy of eleven or twelve."

Janos said, "Sir, my men are all caravan guards and drivers, either known to me or vouched for by those known to me, and the one boy we have is our cook's monkey."

If Janos connected Borric and Suli to the pair the guards looked for, he said nothing. A guard came to where Ghuda and 'Borric stood. The guard looked Ghuda over quickly, but lingered to inspect Borne "Where are you from?" he asked Borric. He asked as if one who felt the need to go through the motions, for not knowing the truth he would assume he was looking for a runaway slave. For a slave to be standing before him calmly, armed and armored, was very improbable to the guard, but duty required he ask.

Borric said, "Here and there. I was born in Odo^koni."

Something in Borric's speech or the way he carried himself sparked an interest in the guard. "You speak with an odd inflection."

Borric didn't miss a beat when he answered, "You sound foreign to me, soldier. My people all talk like I do."

"Captain!" shouted the soldier. "This one matches the description."

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Then Borric thought that while those who were trying to kill him knew he had red hair, the description of the runaway slave would be altered to fit the description given by the sailors who had pursued him from the harbor. What a fool I've been, he thought. I should have found another dye.

The Captain slowly came to inspect Borric and said, "Your name?"

Borric said, "Everyone calls me the Madman."

One eyebrow lifted as the Captain said, "Odd. Why?"

"Not many leave my village and before I left I was known for doing—"

out of affection." He pantomimed a man with little wits, crossing his eyes and sticking his tongue out of the side of his mouth.

Another guard approached, pulling Suli along by the arm. "What have we here?" said the Captain.

"That's the cook's monkey," answered Janos.

"What's your name, boy?" asked the Captain.

Ghuda said, "Suli of Odoskoni."

The Captain turned. "Quiet!"

Borric said, "He's my brother."

The Captain struck out, the back of his gloved hand smashing into Borric's face. Tears came to Borric's eyes, but he held himself in check, despite a sudden urge to skewer the Captain of the Imperial Keshian Guards.

The Captain grabbed Suli by the chin and inspected him. "You have dark eyes."

Suli stammered, "My . . . mother had dark eyes."

The Captain looked hard at Ghuda. "I thought you

Different mothers; same father."

Another guard approached and said, "No one else matches the description, sir."

The soldier holding Suli demanded, "Who is your father?" Suli glanced at Borric but the soldier said, "Answer me!"

"Suli of Odoskoni," the boy squeaked. "I was named for him."

The Captain struck the soldier. "Idiot." He pointed at Borric. "The other one could hear the name."

Borric said, "Captain, take the boy away and ask him the name of our other brother."

The Captain motioned for it to be done, while Borric whispered to Ghuda, "He's going to hold us."

Borric nodded yes, while the Captain came to stand before them. "Now, who is this mythical brother of your two liars?"

"We have a brother Rasta, who is a drunkard," answered Borric, silently praying the boy remembered the impromptu dialogue he had engaged in just before they encountered Salaya in Durbin.

A moment later the soldier returned and said, "The boy says they have an older brother named Rasta who is a drunkard."

Borric could have kissed the boy but held his smile in check. The Captain said, "There is something about you two I don't like." He glanced over to where Janos Saber waited. "You and the rest of your men can go, but I'm taking these two into custody." He then looked at Ghuda and said, "Bring this one along, too."

Ghuda said, "Wonderful," as guards disarmed him

turn had a poor excuse for a cell, used mostly to hold troublesome farmers and herdsmen when arrested for brawling. Now it was the Imperial Captain and his company who used it, to the acute discomfort of the local constable. A retired soldier, with grey in his beard and a belly that hung over his belt, he was just the sort to keep rowdy farm boys in line, but unlikely to be up to any serious fighting. He had quickly agreed to the Captain's demand that he absent himself from the premises.

Borric had overheard him instructing his sergeant to send a post dispatch rider as quickly as possible to the city of Kesh, a request asking what to do with the three prisoners. Borric only made out part of the conversation, but it was obvious the orders came from one high up in the army, and certain precautions were being taken to prevent any undue attention being turned to this massive search. One thing about Kesh, Borric thought, it was a nation of so many people doing so many things, that this sort of operation could continue for a long while with perhaps only one citizen in a

Suli awoke with a jump.

They all looked up and saw a grinning face at the small window above in the cell they were occupying.

"Nakor!" Borric whispered.

Motioning Ghuda to give him a leg up, Borric pulled himself up by the bars of the window, standing upon Ghuda's shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might want another orange," said the grinning little man. "Jail food is never very good."

Borric could only nod dumbly as the little man handed an orange through the bars. Borric tossed it to Suli who hungrily took a bite and spit the peel out.

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"We'll have to take your word for that," said the Prince
"They haven't bothered to feed us."

Ghuda, who was beginning to wobble a bit under Borric's weight, said, "There's one of the all-time stupid questions asked by mortal man in the last thousand years. Of course we want out!"

Grinning widely, the Isalani said, "Then stand over in that corner and cover your eyes."

Borric jumped down from Ghuda's shoulders. Moving to the corner, they covered their eyes. There was a silent moment when nothing happened, then suddenly a shock hit Borric, as if a large hand slammed him against the wall and a loud boom deafened him. He winced at it, then opened his eyes. The wall was now breached. The constable's jail was full of fine dust and the reek of sulphur. Several guards stood holding on to whatever gave them support, while others lay upon the floor, obviously blinded by whatever had opened the wall.

Nakor stood next to four horses, all with saddles bear-

quickly. If you start to fall, just grab the horse's mane and don't!"

Borric was in the saddle and said, "They'll be after us in a moment. Let's—"

"No," said Nakor. "I cut all their saddle girths and bridles." Seemingly from nowhere he produced a wicked-looking knife, as if to illustrate the point. "But it still might be wise to move along, lest those alerted by the sound come investigate."

To that no one had any argument, and they rode out,

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Suli barely able to hang on for his life. A little way down the road, Borric dismounted and fixed Suli's stirrup leathers for him. Suli's horse, sensing an inexperienced rider, was full of nasty tricks, so Borric could only hope the boy would survive any falls that were certain to

Ghuda made a sign of protection, and said, "Are you a magician?"

Nakor laughed. "Of course. Don't you know that all Isalanis are capable of magic feats!"

Borric said, "Is that how you were able to get to the window? You floated up using magic?"

Nakor's laughter increased. "No, Madman. I stood on the back of the horse!"

Feeling relief and exhilaration at this escape, Borric put heels to his horse, and the animal broke into a canter. A moment later, the others could be heard behind him, until a yell and unpleasant thud told them Suli had been tossed.

Turning around to see if the boy was seriously hurt, Borric said, "This may be the slowest escape in history."

ceremonies for the Empress's Seventy-Fifth Jubilee. For centuries Kesh's finest engineers/had refurbished, expanded, added to it, until it stood WiTas the single most impressive feat of construction Eriana had witnessed. It was a gigantic amphitheater carved into the side of the plateau upon which the upper city—the Imperial palace—rested, built by the skill of artisans, the sweat of builders, and the blood of slaves, vast enough to comfortably seat fifty thousand people, more than the populations of Rillanon and Krondor combined.

Eriand motioned his companions to walk with him, for it was still almost an hour before his own part in the formal drama of court was to commence. Kafi Abu Harez, his ever-present guide, was at his elbow, to answer questions.

Finally Eriand said, "Kafi, how long did it take to build this?"

essary Imperial functions, most notably those ceremonies to affirm Sujinrani's benevolence, as well as public executions of traitors. He felt the object lesson was lost on many who would benefit from observing it firsthand.

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"So he decreed that all that was of this plateau, including the lowest part of it, was, in effect, part of the upper city. He then had a small amphitheater created down there, about a dozen feet higher than it is today." With a small sweep of his hand, Kafi illustrated his next remark. "A wedge of rock was then carved out, so that a court could be held in view of those not permitted to ascend to the upper city."

"And it's been enlarged several times since," said

Locklear.

"Yes," said Kafi. "The entrance alone has been en-

throne of gold sits upon a small dais, around which her family and servants, and those of royal blood will rest in comfort. Only those of the highest nobility within the Empire are permitted in that area. To enter without Imperial writ is to die, for Her Majesty's Izmali guards will stand at every entrance."

Pointing out a row of boxes, each slightly lower than the one preceding as they moved away from the Imperial box, he said, "Those closest to Her Majesty are the highest born in the Empire, those who make up the Gallery of Lords and Masters." He indicated the entire level they walked upon.

Eriand said, "Five, six thousand people could stand upon this level alone, Kafi."

The desertman nodded. "Perhaps more. This level reaches down and embraces the floor below, like arms surrounding a body. At the distant end we will be a full hundred feet below the Empress's throne. Come, let

walked, nobles who would proceed Eriand's party in being presented to the Empress hurried past, a very few taking a moment to offer the Prince of the Kingdom of the Isles a slight bow. Eriand noted the half-dozen tunnels that opened onto the broad walkway behind the boxes. "All of these can't originate in the palace alone, can they?"

Kafi nodded. "Ah, but they do." 1

Eriand said, "I would think the safety of the Empress would supercede the convenience of those nobles needing to come down here once or twice a year. Those tunnels are an invitation to any invader seeking to enter the palace."

Kafi shrugged. "It is academic, my young friend. For you must understand, that for an invader to threaten the tunnels, they must hold to the lower city, and should any invader hold the lower city, the Empire is already lost. For if they hold the lower city, the might of Kesh is

ently."

"I understand," said Kafi. He pointed to the area between the down-sweeping boxes and the floor of the amphitheater. The stone had been cut in descending, concentric crescents, so that a grandstand had been chiseled from the rock of the plateau. A dozen stairways from the floor upward to the level just below the boxes were already filled to capacity with colorfully dressed citizens. "There is where the lesser nobles, masters of guilds, and influential merchants of the city will sit, upon cushions or the bare stone, all around. The center is kept clear for those being presented to the Empress."

Kafi said, "You and your party will enter there, Highness, after the nobles of Kesh and before the commoners, as Ambassadors of all nations will. The Empress has favored you by placing your delegation before all oth-

courtesy."

If Kafi shared the sarcasm, he kept that fact well hidden. Moving on as if nothing impolitic had been said, he continued, "The common people of Kesh are permitted to view the festivities from across the entrance, atop roofs, and many other vantage points."

Eriand looked out over the lower city, where thousands of commoners were held back by a line of soldiers. Beyond the street that crossed before the amphitheater people crowded upon the rooftops of buildings and into every window providing a vantage point. Eriand found the sheer number of people in one place breathtaking.

Gamina, who had been silently walking beside her husband, said, "I doubt they can see much."

Kafi shook his head. "Perhaps, but then, before the rule of Sujinrani Kanafi, they saw nothing of court cere-

given there was no reason not to agree, he let Locklear lead him away, leaving James, Gamina, and Eriand relatively alone. Several Keshian servants hovered nearby, taking care of the many details of preparation. A few of them were agents of the Imperial Court, no doubt, thought Eriand as he regarded James. "What?"

James turned and leaned upon the marble railing of the gallery, as if looking out over the vast amphitheater. "Gamina?" he said softly.

Gamina closed her eyes, then her voice came into Eriand's head. We are being watched.

Eriand had to force himself not to look around. We expected that, he replied.

No, by magic arts.

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you 'd sense it. And I don't think we're going to be under any less scrutiny any time soon, so we might as well hope that we're right.

Yes, agreed Gamina. I wasn't aware of the magic until I went looking for it. It's very subtle. And good. I think whoever is using it can hear what we say, perhaps even see how we act. But if they could hear our thoughts, I think I would know.

Gamina closed her eyes a moment, as if dizzy from the heat. James steadied her for a moment. I don't think it's a mind, or I would have sensed purpose behind it.

What do you mean? asked Eriand.

I think we are under the focus of a device. Perhaps a crystal or mirror. My father has used several in his studies over the year. If that is so, then we can be seen for certain, and either our lip movement is being read by one so trained or we are being heard aloud. Our

"Hours, no doubt," commented James. To Eriand he said, We've walked into a stew and it's rapidly coming to a boil. There's a plot to overthrow the Empress's rule, that's our agents best guess.

Feigning a yawn of boredom, the Prince said, "I hope I can be alert throughout." Mentally, he said, What does that have to do with plunging Kesh and the Kingdom into warp

If we knew that, we'd have a better idea who's trying to start this revolt. I have a bad feeling about this, Eriand.

Why?

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Besides the obvious dangers, there are going to be a lot of soldiers in this city this afternoon. Each subject

should rest before this ordeal begins."

James said, "Yes, that would be best, I think."

Gamina spoke in both men's minds. What should we

do, James?

Wait. That's all we can do, was his reply. And remain

alert.

Kafi returns, observed Gamina.

The desertman said, "Highness, your remarks will be doubly appreciated for their sincerity and brevity. After the ceremonies of this day, I fear you shall see that economy of speech is not an Imperial trait."

Eriand was about to answer, when Kafi said, "Look! It

begins."

A tall man, old but still muscular, entered the Impe-

Kafi whispered, though it seemed impossible to Eriand anyone would overhear them, "The Falcon of Kesh, the royal insignia. It is only seen publicly at the highest festivals. The falcon gripping the sun's orb is holy to the trueblood."

The old man lifted the staff and brought it down upon the stones, and Eriand was astonished at how loud the sound was. Then he spoke. "O Kesh, Greatest of Nations, harken to me!"

The acoustics were perfect in the amphitheater. Even those across the boulevard, sitting atop the buildings, could hear the man perfectly as the sounds of the crowd died away to a hush.

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"She is come! She is come! She Who Is Kesh has come, and she graces your lives by her presence! | At this a procession of hundreds of the trueblood began slowly

and ranks, entered the Imperial box.

Eriand thought he had met a great many of those who were important to the Empire, but just the Imperial party alone numbered dozens of strangers. And the only one he had spoken to on more than one occasion was Lord Nirome, the stout and inadvertently comic noble who had greeted them at the boundary of the upper city as aide-de-camp to Prince Awari. Eriand was surprised to discover Nirome was related to the royal family. Then, upon reflection, it seemed a reasonable explanation for why a man so obviously maladroit would have a high post in the government. The men and women of the royal blood continued to enter the box and take their places as the Master of Ceremonies continued to intone the Empress's virtues. Impressive, Eriand thought, trying to establish contact with Gamina.

James's wife lightly touched him on the arm, as she answered. Yes. James thinks so, as well.

"As long as you make a timely entrance, there is no reason why not, Highness."

"Good," said Eriand, smiling for the desertman's benefit. "Would you answer a few questions?"

"If I am able," he answered.

And if you could chime in with what you know, James, he added.

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Gamina relayed the message, for James nodded

"How is it there are so many in the Imperial box, yet I have not seen any of the great lords and masters yet?"

Kafi said, "Only those related to the Empress by blood may join her in the Imperial box, servants and guards notwithstanding, of course."

Providing enough people die in the proper order, Eriand added drily.

There is that, answered James.

When the relatives had entered, the first discordant note intruded: suddenly black-clad warriors appeared. Each wore turbans of black, with face coverings that left only the eyes exposed. Long flowing robes were designed for easy, quick movement, and each had a black scabbard scimitar at his belt. Eriand had heard tell of these: Izmalis, the nearly legendary Shadow Warriors of Kesh. Tales had grown in the telling until they were regarded as almost supernatural. Only those most highly placed in the Empire could afford such as bodyguards. They were counted superior warriors, as well as spies of superior ability—and assassins if needs be, it was whispered.

James attempted to sound casual as he said, "My lord Kafi, wouldn't it be usual for the Empress to be sur-

Imperial Guards.

When the Izmalis were in place, a dozen husky slaves, bodies oiled, entered carrying a litter, upon which sat the Empress. Throughout the entrance of the Imperial party, the old man with the golden staff had been intoning a long ritual introduction, citing great feats accom-

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plished under Lakeisha, the Empress. Suddenly Eriand caught a shift in tension and began listening to the introduction.

". . . crushed the rebellion of Lesser Kesh," intoned the old man. Eriand remembered from his study of Keshian history that about the time of his birth all of the nations south of the two mountain ranges that transverse the continent—the Girdle of Kesh—had been brought to heel after twenty years of successful revolt. The self-proclaimed Keshian Confederacy had been

the crowd—not just the commoners in the street, but from many of the lesser nobles in the amphitheater below—bad blood still existed between those subject peoples and their ruler.

Gamina went pale, and Kafi noticed. "Is my lady feeling ill?"

Gamina gripped James's arm and stood on wobbly legs a moment. She shook her head, and said, "The heat, my lord. If I could please have some water."

Kafi merely motioned and instantly a servant was at their side. Kafi instructed him, and a moment later the servant offered a cool cup of water to Gamina. She sipped it, while speaking silently to James, Locklear, and Eriand. / was caught unprepared for that. The sudden flow of anger and hatred. Many of those here would happily murder the Empress. And many, many of the angry minds are in the Imperial box.

Kafi said, "That is wise."

Eriand returned his attention to the next group to enter. The Prince and both Princesses of Kesh had entered after their mother, and now the most powerful lords and masters in the Empire were being announced.

Lord Jaka, Commander of the Imperial Charioteers, entered. "How important are the charioteers, Kafi?" asked Eriand.

"I'm not certain I understand, Highness."

"I mean, is their position only tradition, or do they really stand as the heart of the army? On those occasions in the past where our two nations have . . . had differences, we've always faced your dreaded Dog Soldiers."

overthrow the Empress, offered James.

Eriand nodded, as if considering Kafi's words. To Gamina, Locklear, and James he thought. He seems pretty solid, from outward appearances.

He's an important man, Eriand, answered James. No coups d'etat would succeed without him either participating or neutralized.

Kafi touched Eriand upon the arm. "Speaking of the Dog Soldiers, here is their master. Sula Jafi Butar, Prince Regent of the Armies, and hereditary ruler of Kistan, Isan, Paji, and the other states where our armies are recruited."

The man who entered was fairly nondescript, save that he looked a black-skinned version of the trueblood. His dress was identical, white kilt, sandals, and shaved head, but his skin shown like ebony in the sun. Most of his followers were equally dark, though a few could pass

they are among the oldest lines in the nation, second only to the trueblood. Aber Bukar, Lord of the Armies is the true commander, but this man has a lot of influence with the army.

Kafi said, "Perhaps we should begin moving downward, Prince Eriand. That way we shall not have any risk of a breach of courtesy."

Eriand said, "Please. Lead on."

A group of guards fell in around Eriand and his companions, and the Prince was momentarily startled. He did not notice them approaching in the crowd. They made no cry nor did they need to. People on the ramp behind the boxes seemed to sense their approach instinctively and give way. James observed, "At this social strata, people seem to be alert to the possible approach of someone of greater rank."

Kafi gave a shrug with a gesture of his hands down

of men entering. Each man in front had a shaved head, save for a scalplock down the center, combed high and kept erect by a pomade or wax. A fall of horsehair wai died to match the wearer's natural color and tied by a leather thong woven into the scalplock. The men wore only a loincloth and their bodies were oiled to a gloss. Their skin was sunburned, but seemed lighter than most Keshians, with a reddish cast. Most of the men were dark haired. Then behind came younger men. who wore their hair long, tied behind in imitation of the horsehair fall, but with ringlets loose at the ears. These wore brightly colored leather armor, with wide flarin" at the top, giving them an exaggerated breadth of shoulders. They also wore only loincloths, rather than trousers. All wore soft leather boots tied at mid-calf.

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Eriand stopped his party a moment. "Kafi, who are

1'hpV

lord and still hold strongly to their own national identity.'It is only because they have been allowed to rise highly in the court they remain loyal to the Empire."

And because their city-state is on the wrong side of the Girdle of Kesh, added James, with a humorous feeling to his thoughts. Aber Bukar, the Empress's General, had to threaten them to get them to put cavalry in the field against the rebellious Confederacy, according to our reports.

As the group resumed their travel to the bottom of the amphitheater, Eriand said, "I don't see any women. Is there a reason for that?"

Kafi said, "The Ashuntai are a strange people. Their women"—he glanced at Gamina, as if not wishing to give offense—"their women are considered property. They are bartered and bought and sold. The Ashuntai do not count them human." If Kafi found this distasteful, he hid it well.

daughters for camels." He glanced over his shoulder to the box where Lord Ravi's company sat.

"But those sell their female children, and if a woman troubles a man, he is free to do with her as he wishes, including killing her. They are taught to despise warm feelings, and to love a woman is to be weak. Desire and lust they count necessary for breeding sons, but love is . . ." Kafi shrugged. "Among my own people we

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have a saying, 'Even the most high born man is but a servant in his own bedchamber.' Many of our best rulers took counsel in the arms of their wives, to the benefit of their nation.

"But those—" Kafi glanced down. "Forgive me. I do not mean to lecture."

"No," said Gamina. "By all means. I find this fascinat-

knew. Ravi's son, Ranavi, was a fine boy and we used to ride together. It is an open question who are the best horsemen in the Empire, the Ashuntai or we of the Jal-Pur. We would often race our horses on the grasslands beyond the city gate, his Ashuntai pony, my desert horse. We became friends after a fashion.

"There was a girl. An Ashuntai girl who I came to know." Keeping his face a mask, Kafi said, "I attempted to barter for her, in their fashion, but Ravi made her a prize for one of their festivals. She was won by one of their warriors and he took her to his home. It was this warrior's third or fourth wife, I believe." He waved his hand, as if this were a long ago, nearly forgotten incident. "They bind their women with collars of leathel and lead them on chains in public. They do not let them wear clothing, save a loincloth, even in cold weather. The fact of their being without clothing is of little importance to the trueblood, but the Empress, as her mother before, finds their treatment at the hands of their husbands, sons, and fathers personally distasteful

ment, that the Brotherhood of the Horse was allowed to rise so high in the court of the Empire."

"Upon such things are the strengths of nations founded," Locky remarked drily.

"It is so," replied Kafi.

They reached the bottom of the long ramp and a line of guards stood upon either side, keeping the crowds away from the staging area for those who would enter and be presented to the court. Eriand's guards-were waiting for him below, wearing the full dress uniform of the Kingdom, and the badge of the Royal Krondorian Palace Guard upon their chest. Eriand noted with some amusement the Quegan delegate stood behind his men, fuming at the Kingdom of the Isles being given precedence over his own nation.

in the attempt."

Without a note of bitterness or emotion as he spoke, Kafi said, "This, you can see, is why I have some difficulty appreciating the better qualities of the Ashuntai." Softly, he added, "Whatever they may be."

Gamina looked at the desertman with sympathy, but said nothing.

They had been standing in place for ten minutes, waiting to move up to the entrance to the amphitheater. No one had spoken since Kafi had related the story of his friend. Locklear decided it was a good time to change the subject. "My lord Kafi, where are the delegates from the Free Cities?"

"Absent, my lord," answered Kafi. "They would not send anyone to the Jubilee. Those people who once were Imperial Bosnia still have no official dealings with the Empire."

Why is it different with the Free Cities?"

As they moved into place in the procession, Kafi said, "Those who live in what you call the Free Cities were once our loyal subjects. When the first revolt of the Confederacy occurred, ages past, Kesh stripped all her garrisons north of the Jal-Pur, leaving those colonists to fend for themselves. Queg, on the other hand, had successfully revolted a decade before. Queg is a successful revolutionary nation. Your own Kingdom were always foreign, but the Free Cities are a people who were betrayed by their own rulers. They were farmers and tavernkeepers, left to defend themselves."

Eriand thought about this as they moved forward a few steps in anticipation of being announced. He glanced at the upper gallery, and saw it was quickly filling up as the last of the lords and masters were entering. What was Bosania, part of which was now the Kingdom's own duchy of Crydee, conquered by Eriand's own great, great grandfather, was a terribly harsh land,

As one, the entire company set off, only Gamina not walking in military lockstep, as they trod the flat stone floor of the amphitheater. It took a full five minutes to cross the vast base of the bowl, but at last, under the scorching sun of Kesh, the Prince of the Isles was formally presented to the Empress of Great Kesh. And not until this moment did Eriand really understand what had been true since Borric's disappearance. He, not his brother, now stood before the mightiest ruler in the world, and he someday might find her successor his deadliest enemy, for he, not Borric, would someday be

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King of the Isles. And not since he had been a little boy held in his mother's arms had Eriand felt so frightened.

The presentation went by in a blur. Eriand hardly recalled being introduced to the formal court, and could hardly remember speaking the words he had

"Kafi, why has the festival been held off this long past Banapis?"

Kafi said, "Unlike your people, we of Kesh do not count the Festival of Midsummer as the date of our birth. Here, each man who knows it, celebrates the event of his birth on the day he was born. So, as She Who Is Kesh was given to the world by the gods on the fifteenth day of Dzanin, so her birth is celebrated upon that day. It will be the last day of Jubilee."

Eriand said, "How odd. To celebrate your birthday on the actual day you were born. Why there must be dozens of little celebrations each day. I would feel cheated if I were to miss the great festival at Banapis."

"Different customs," Locklear remarked.

A servant, wearing the garb of the trueblood, appeared before the Prince and bowed low. He held out a scroll, sealed with a golden ribbon. Kafi, acting as the

breaking the seal. He read the immaculate script slowly, as he had never been gifted with the written high language of Imperial Kesh. As he read, Gamina began to laugh.

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James turned suddenly, fearful for an instant that his wife was inadvertently revealing her ability to hear thoughts, but as he did, Gamina said, "Why, Eriand, I swear you're blushing."

Eriand smiled, putting the scroll into his belt. "Ah . . . just the sun, I suspect," he said, but he couldn't hide the embarrassed smile that refused to leave his mouth alone.

"What is it?" said Locklear playfully.

"An invitation," said Eriand.

make . . . arrangements? To . . . call on each other, mean."

Kafi shrugged. "It is not unheard of, though the Princess, being so highly born, can stretch the boundaries of . . . decorum more than others, if you follow."

"What about the Princess Sojjana?" asked Locklear

James grinned. "I was wondering when you'd get around to that one."

Gamina narrowed her eyes a bit. "'That one?' "

"A figure of speech, my love. Locky is known in court* for trying . . . er, to get to know every pretty woman that comes into view."

Kafi said, "If you send a note requesting a meeting of the Princess, be prepared for it to be but one of many. Besides, it is said that these days she is ... spendin;

chance to speak with her ..."

Kafi made the gesture for "things happen" again

"Ma'lish "

James glanced at Eriand, who was off in a world of his

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own. To Gamina, James silently said, Kafi isn 't saying something about the Princess Sojiana. Can you tell what it is?

No, she answered. But I have an impression at the mention of her name.

What is it?

Extreme danger.

point," he grumbled.

Ghuda, who stood over him, said, "That's for costing me my pay. I can't go looking for Saber now with half the Imperial Army looking for me, and even if I found him, I doubt he'd pay me what he owes me. And it's your fault, Madman."

Borric could only agree, though sitting on damp straw in an abandoned barn in the middle of a nation of people seemingly bent on killing him at every opportunity, he felt he deserved at least a little sympathy. "Look, Ghuda, I'll make it up to you."

The mercenary turned to remove a saddle from one of the horses they stole and, over his shoulder, said, "Oh, really? And how, pray tell, do you plan on doing that? Are you going to send a polite note to the Office of Aber Bukar, Lord of the Armies, saying, 'Please, kind lord, let my friend off with a stern talking to. He didn't know I had the kill-on-sight order on my head when he

sufficient, but in either case, it gave Borric's little band a chance to rest up the horses. Like most good cavalry provided, there was grain in the saddlebags, so Borric set about giving a handful to his horse. Suli sat tenderly upon a half-rotten pile of straw, a study in misery. Nakor had already unsaddled his horse and was wiping it down

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with the cleanest handful of straw he could find. He was absently humming a nameless tune as he went about his work. And his grin had not vanished even for an instant.

Ghuda said, "When the horse is rested, Madman, you and I are quits. I mean to get myself back to Farafra somehow and take ship down to Lesser Kesh. Things are a little less Imperial down there, if you catch my meaning. Just maybe I'll live through this."

Borric said, "Ghuda, wait."

alone? Thanks, but I'd rather die in the arms of a whore many years from now."

"No, I mean I can't get to Kesh without you."

Ghuda glanced heavenward. "Why me?"

Borric said, "Look at the boy. He's terrified and so sore he can't think. He might know the back allies of Durbin, but he knows nothing else. And the Isalani . . . well, he's not exactly what I'd call reliable." Borric put a finger to his head and made a circular motion.

Ghuda glanced at the sorry-looking pair and was forced to agree. "So, that's your lookout. Why should I care?"

Borric thought and couldn't come up with a single reason. Circumstances had thrown them together, but there was no real friendship. The older mercenary was likable in his own fashion, but not what Borric would

Ghuda's eyes narrowed as he considered Borric's words. "You're not just saying this?"

Borric shook his head. "I give you my word."

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"Where are you going to get your hands on that kind of gold?" asked Ghuda.

^Borric considered telling him the entire story but couldn't bring himself to trust Ghuda that much. A nameless man blamed for a crime he didn't commit was one thing; a prince being hunted was another. Even though Borric knew anyone who guessed his identity was as good as dead should the guards find him in Borric's company, Ghuda might be tempted enough by thoughts of reward to push his luck. Borric's experience

didn't seem improbable. "There are people in Kesh who can clear me of that, and more, they have resources—substantial resources—and can provide you with"—he quickly calculated a sufficiently impressive figure by Kingdom standards into Keshian currency—"two thousand golden ecu."

Ghuda's eyes widened a second, then he shook his head. "Sounds good. Madman, but then so do a whore's promises."

Borric said, "All right, three thousand." Looking to call Borric's bluff, he said, "Five thousand!"

"Done!" replied the Prince. He spit in his hand and held it out.

Ghuda looked at the outstretched hand, offered in

Borric said, "If we make it, you'll die a rich man,

Ghuda Bule."

Ghuda threw himself down upon the damp straw to

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rest as well as he could. "I would have preferred it had you chosen to put that a different way, Madman."

Borric left the mercenary muttering to himself and sat down next to Suli. "Are you going to make it?" he

The boy said, "Yes. I only hurt a little. But this beast has a back like a sword blade. I am split in two."

Borric laughed. "It's hard at first. We'll try a little instruction, here in the barn, before we leave tonight."

Ghuda said, "Not that it will do him much good, Madman. We're going to have to lose those saddles. The

"With the Jubilee," replied Nakor, "it is easier for us to reach the city by river travel up the Same, on a boat for hire. We will be but four among multitudes. But to travel so requires payment. So we must have funds."

Borric considered the little money he had remaining after buying his clothing and armor in Farafra, and knew Nakor was right. They didn't have enough funds among them to buy a first-class meal for one at a decent inn.

"Who would buy them?" asked Ghuda. "They are branded."

"True," said the Isalani, "but that can be dealt with. The saddles, alas, cannot be altered without damaging them to the point of worthlessness."

Ghuda levered himself up on one arm. "How can you change that brand? Do you have a running iron in your rucksack?"

nearest horse. "The army brands all livestock with the

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Imperial Army glyph." Dabbing at it with the brush, he began to apply fluid to the horse's flank. A faint sizzling sound could be heard, and the hair where he touched with the brush began to blacken, as if being touched by flame. "Hold the horse, please," he said to Borric. "This does not harm them, but the heat can alarm the animal."

Borric went and grabbed at the animal's bridle, holding it while the animal's ears turned this way and that, as it tried to decide whether or not to get upset with the proceedings.

After a moment, Nakor said, "There. It is now the glyph of Jung Sut, horse trader of Shing Lai."

Borric came around and looked. The brand had

Ghuda said, "Well, then, when you're done with that, and we're ready to leave, wake me, will you?" So saying, he lay back on the damp straw and tried to make himself comfortable.

Borric looked at Nakor and said, "When we reach the river, it would probably be better if you left us."

"I don't think so," he said with a grin. "I intend to travel to Kesh in any event, as the occasion of the Jubilee will make it easy to earn money. There will be many games of chance and many opportunities for my small magics to serve me. Besides, if we move together, with Ghuda and the boy traveling a few hours behind or ahead, we will not be those the guards are seeking.'

"Perhaps," said Borric, "but they have a pretty good description of the three of us by now."

"But not me," grinned the Isalani. "No guard caught sight of me when they stopped the wagon."

"It is a secret," he said with an affable grin. "But it is no matter. What does matter is that we must do something about your appearance." He cast a knowing eye upon Borric's uncovered head. "Your dark hair grows suspiciously red at the roots. So we must devise another look for you, my friend." ^

Borric shook his head. "Another surprise from that bag of yours?"

Bending over the bag, Nakor's grin widened more than usual. "Of course, my friend."

Borric awoke to Suli's pushing his shoulders emphatically. He came instantly awake and could see that it was growing dark outside. Ghuda was alert by the door, his sword drawn, so Borric was at his side with his own weapon at the ready an instant later.

"What is it?" hissed Borric.

Borric had decided which of the four horses was likely to be the most agreeable for Suli and gave the boy a boost up. Giving him the reins, he said, "Hold on to her mane with your left hand if we have to go anywhere in a hurry. And keep your legs as long as you can; it's balance, not gripping with your knees. Understand?"

The boy nodded, but it was clear from his expression the idea of going anywhere on a horse in a hurry was a notion only slightly less terrifying than running into more guards. Borric turned and found Nakor carrying the saddles out of the barn. "Where are you taking them?"

The grinning Isalani said, "There is an old compost pile in back. They'll not look under it, I'm thinking."

Borne had to laugh, and in a minute the chronically happy little man was back in the barn, nimbly leaping to his horse's back, despite his ever-present rucksack

Ghuda said, "Come on. Let's get as far up the road as possible by dawn."

Borric motioned and the mercenary pushed open the barn door, then jumped to his horse's back. He kicked it firmly and set off at a trot, with Borric, Suli, and Nakor coming behind. Borric put aside a terrible feeling that every turn in the road hid another ambush, and focused on one fact: every passing minute brought him that much closer to Kesh, and to Eriand and the others.

The town of Panes was busy, as it squatted upon the bridge across the River Same, where the road beginning at Farafra and ending at Khattara, in the northeast, joined. Just east of the bridge, on the south bank, a huge warehouse and riverfront district had grown over the years, as teamsters pulled heavy wagons up close to barges and riverboats, which carried goods into the heart of the Empire. A few shallow-draft sailing boats could be seen, as the prevailing winds were from the west, so that it was possible to sail upriver most times of

Mountains. The garment consisted of a colorfully died piece of cloth tied around his waist, then drawn over the shoulder, like a toga. His sword arm was bare, as were his legs. Instead of boots, he now wore cross-garter sandals. Borric felt both ridiculous and vulnerable without armor. But it was a good choice as far as the Bendrifi being one of the few fair-skinned races native to Kesh. Borric's hair had been cut close to his scalp and dyed with a foul-smelling concoction that Nakor had obtained the night before, and now he was a startlingly

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near-white blond color; the hair was standing straight no—held in place by a sweet-smelling pomade—while shaved over the ears. The Bendrifi were also a stand-offish aloof tribe, so it was unlikely anyone would wonder at his reticent manner; Borric prayed he never ran into one this far from home, for their language was also unrelated to that of the other peoples of Kesh and Borric couldn't speak a single word. Though while Borric

were worth and had managed to find the Prince a new rapier in this modest town, when Borric had failed to obtain one in one of Kesh's largest cities. Against any reasonable expectation, Nakor had produced exactly what Borric needed to change his appearance to a startling degree.

Suli was now garbed as a boy of the Beni-Sherin, a large tribe of desertmen in the Jal-Pur, with a sword at his side. He wore a robe and head covering, with only his eyes visible, and if he remembered to walk erect, could pass for a short adult. The boy had resisted giving up his old familiar rags until Ghuda threatened to cut him out of them with his sword. Given Ghuda's lack of patience since their arrest, Borric wasn't sure if he was only jesting.

Ghuda had sold his armor and purchased a finer rig, an almost new leather harness and a matching pair of bracers. His old dented helm was gone, replaced by one similar to that worn by the Dog Soldiers, a metal pot

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one whit less ridiculous to Borric. But the Isalani felt this was a sufficient change in costume, and given his resourcefulness, Borric was unwilling to argue.

Nakor had secured passage for them on a barge heading downriver to the city of Kesh. They would be four among about a hundred passengers.

As Borric expected, there were guards everywhere. They attempted to look unobtrusive, but there were too many, spending too much time peering into every passing face, for them not to be there for a purpose.

Turning a corner, Borric and Suli walked a few yards ahead of Nakor and Ghuda, toward a tavern only a few yards from the dockside. The boat would be leaving in two hours' time. They would act the part of travelers forced to idle their time away in the company of strang-

approached. "What do you mean?" Borric asked.

Suli pointed back to the next door. "I heard only a few words, but I know the voice."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. Let me return and perhaps I can remember." The boy turned back and walked past the door, halting a moment on the other side, then turned the corner and looked down it as if expecting to see something. He then made a display of waiting a moment, turned, and shrugged to Borric, then walked back. As soon as he was past the door, he hurried to Borric and said, "That was one I heard in the Governor of Durbin's house that night I overheard the plot to kill you!"

Borric hesitated. If they passed by again and glanced in the doorway, they would call unwanted attention to themselves, but he wanted to know who this blood-

ions waited, already drinking ale. He paused at their table for a moment, saying, "Someone who knows me may be in town," then turned and sat at the table next

to them.

A short time later, Suli came and sat next to Borric.

"It was the man in the black cloak. He wears it still, master. It was his voice," whispered the boy.

"Did you get a look at him?"

The boy said, "Enough that I might know him again."

"Good," whispered Borric, knowing Ghuda and Nakor were listening. "If you see him again, let us know."

"Master, there is something else."

"What?"

Borric said, "What does that mean?"

It was Ghuda who answered, hissing angrily over his shoulder. "It means, you mush-brained maniac, that that trueblood is not just a trueblood, but he's also a member of the Royal House of Kesh! They're the only ones allowed to wear the golden torque! He's maybe only a very distant cousin to the Empress, but she still sends him a gift on his birthday! Just what the hell kind of mess have you gotten us into?"

Borric fell silent as a large, sullen serving woman approached. In a raspy voice he ordered two mugs of ale and when she left, he half-turned to Ghuda. "It's a very deep and twisted mess, my friend. As I said, it is politics."

When the serving woman brought ale to them and left, Ghuda said, "My dear dead mother wanted me to go into an honorable trade, like grave robbing. Would I

trying to kill him and Eriand? And why? It was obvious that this plot came down from the very highest levels in the Empire, but from the royal family? He sighed and drank his bitter ale, and tried to relax his mind as he waited for the call that the boat was ready to leave

The call to board rang across the dockside, and Borric and his companions, as well as a half-dozen others in the inn, rose, gathering together bundles and packages, and crowded through the door. Outside, Borric saw a company of Imperial Guards waiting at the boarding ramp, watching everyone who climbed onto the boat. These were the Guards of the Inner Legion, the command given dominion over the heart of Kesh. Each man wore a metal helm and breastplate enameled in black. Short black kilts and black greaves and bracers gave them an intimidating appearance. The officer in charge of the company wore a helm topped with a red horsehair crest, with another long red tail falling down his back. Borric said, "Quietly now, and act like you have nothing

seemed to satisfy them, for they waved him aboard.

Then Borric's heart seemed to go cold as he saw Nakor turn and speak to a guard, pointing at him across the crowd. The guard said something and nodded, and then spoke to a second guard. Borric felt his mouth go dry as three guards left the ramp and started walking purposefully toward him. Deciding he might need room to break free, Borric moved toward the ramp as if nothing unusual was occurring.

As he attempted to move out of the guards' way, one put a restraining hand upon his arm. "Hold a moment, Bendrifi." It was not a request.

Borric did his best to look irritated and disdainful. He then glanced to where the officer stood on the ramp,

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observing the exchange. "What?" he said, sounding as

Borric stared the man in the eye, made a slight snarling sound as he curved his lip, then said one of the phrases Suli taught him. He yanked his arm out of the legionary's grip, but when three hands went to the hilts of their swords, he held up his own, palm outward, showing he intended no trouble.

Turning his back on them, he attempted to maintain the pose of being a touchy, rude hillman, and hoped his knees weren't looking as wobbly as they felt. He boarded the boat among the last to climb the ramp, and found himself a seat on the opposite side of the wide craft from where his three companions sat. The six guardsmen were the last to board and they stationed themselves at the stern, in a group, talking among themselves. Silently, Borric vowed that when they reached the city of Kesh he would happily throttle the little Isalani.

A day and a half later, stopping three times along the way, they saw the skyline of the city of Kesh in view.

his father had been talking about—Eriand and he were both Princes of the Blood Royal, and there was really nothing they couldn't do, but that was because of what they were.

Now Borric understood much of what his father had tried to explain before, and now the stakes were his own

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life, his brother's, and perhaps the life of the Kingdom, as well.

As they approached the upper docks of Kesh, Borric saw companies of soldiers upon the boat landing. They might be taking passage across the Overn Deep or upriver, or they might be the normal guard for this city, but they also might be screening-passengers into the city, one more barrier between himself and his brother.

As the boat began nosing in to the dockside, Borric

inspected as they left, he knew he couldn't chance being singled out again. So as it came time to leave, he turned to the guardsman and said, again in his gruff voice, "I said a rude thing to you at Pahes, guardsman."

The legionary's eyes narrowed as he said, "I assumed that, though I don't speak your babble."

Borric mounted the gangplank in step with him and said, "I come to celebrate the Jubilee, and to 'make devotions at the temple of Tith-Onaka." Borric had noticed the man wore the good-luck charm common to those soldiers who worship the War God with Two Faces. "At such a holy time, I wish no bad blood with any soldier. The Isalani cheated me at cards. That is why I was vexed. Will you take my hand and give pardon for the offense I gave."

The guardsman said, "No man should enter the Planner of Battle's Temple with an affront to a warrior on them." At the foot of the ramp, before the guards who

shook again, and Borric turned and shouldered past two

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soldiers on the dock. One had observed the farewell and started to say something to Borric, but thought better of it and turned his attention to another man trying to push past, a strange little Isalani from Shing Lai.

Borric crossed the street, then paused, waiting to see what was occurring. Nakor and the guard seemed to be in some sort of an argument, and several other guardsmen turned to see what the problem was. Ghuda materialized beside Borric, seemingly having come to that spot by chance. A few moments later, Suli came to stand next to Borric. Nakor now had a circle of guards and one pointed at the rucksack he always carried.

Finally, as if relenting on some point, the Isalani handed the rucksack over to the first guard, who stuck his hand in the bag. After a moment, the guard turned

Ghuda said, "Well, Madman, we are in the city of Kesh. Where to now?"

Glancing about, Borric said, "Turn right and walk along the dockside. At the third street, turn right again and keep going until you find an inn. We'll meet at the first inn we encounter." Ghuda nodded and headed off. "Suli," Borric whispered, "wait for Nakor and tell him."

The boy said, "Yes, master," and Borric left him, and made his way leisurely after Ghuda.

The inn was a seedy riverfront establishment with the grandiose name the Emperor's Standard and Jeweled Crown. Borric had no idea what event in Keshian history had prompted this odd name, but there was nothing in the least bit Imperial nor jewel-like about this establishment. It was like a hundred other dark and smoky establishments in a hundred cities on Midkemia. Languages and customs might differ, but the patrons

Glancing around, he saw that the usual respect for privacy prevailed here as in the other like inns he and Eriand used to frequent in the Kingdom. Casually, looking down at his mug, he said, "We can assume that at least one of these customers is either an Imperial agent or an informer."

Ghuda removed his helm, scratched his scalp, itching from perspiration, and said, "That's a safe bet."

"We won't stay here," said Borric.

"That's a relief," said Ghuda, "though I would like a drink before we seek lodgings."

Borric agreed and the big man caught the attention of a serving boy, who returned with four chilled ales. Borric sipped his and said, "I'm surprised it's chilled."

Ghuda stretched. "If you bother to glance north the next time you're outside. Madman, you'll notice a tiny

Nakor said, "I don't like it. Ale should be warm. This makes my head hurt."

Borric laughed. Ghuda said, "Well, then, we're in Kesh. How do we reach these friends of yours?"

Borric lowered his voice. "I . . ."

Ghuda's eyes narrowed. "What now?"

"I know where they are. I'm just not sure how to get there."

Ghuda's eyes became angry slits. "Where?"

"They are in the palace."

"Gods' teeth!" Ghuda exploded, and several of the inn's patrons turned for a moment to see what caused the outburst. Lowering his voice to a whisper, but not

are you going?" asked Borric.

"Anywhere but where you are going. Madman.

Borric said, "You gave your word!"

Looking down, Ghuda said, "I said I'd get you to Kesh. You're in Kesh. You didn't say a thing about the palace." Pointing an accusatory finger at Borric he said, "You owe me five thousand golden ecu, and I'll never see a tenth of one coin of it."

Borric said, "You'll get it. You have my word. But I have to find my friends."

"In the palace," hissed Ghuda.

"Sit down, people are watching."

Ghuda sat. "Let them watch. I'm going to be on the first boat for Kimri I can find. I'll get to Hansule and

Ghuda couldn't believe Borric was serious. After a moment, he said, "Double what you promised. Ten thousand ecu."

Borric said, "Done."

"Ha!" snapped Ghuda. "Easy enough to promise anything when we're all going to be dead in a day or two."

Turning to Suli, Borric said, "We need to get in touch with certain people."

Suli blinked uncomprehendingly. "Master?"

Whispering, Borric said, "The Guild of Thieves. The Mockers. The Ragged Brotherhood, or whatever they're called in this city."

Suli nodded as if he understood, but his expression showed he didn't have a hint as to what Borric wanted. "Master?"

that, won't you?" Suli nodded. "Just drop a coin in his hand and say there's a traveler who needs to speak to someone on a matter of urgency and that it is a matter worth the time of people who can get things done in this city. Understand?"

"I think so, master."

"If the beggar asks any mo're questions, just say this . . ." Borric sought to remember some of the stories James had told him about his own boyhood with the thieves of Krondor and after a long moment he added, ". . . one is in town who wishes not to cause difficulty by being here, but who wishes to make arrangements so that all may benefit. Can you do that?"

Suli repeated his instructions and when Borric was satisfied he had them correctly, he sent the boy off. They drank in relative silence, until Borric saw Nakor

"How'd you do that?" asked Ghuda.

"It's a trick," answered the laughing little man, as if that explained everything.

At sundown, Suli returned. He sat down next to Borric and said, "Master, it took a while, but at last did I find such a one as you required. I gave him a coin and said as I was instructed. That one asked many questions, but I only repeated what you said, and refused more. He bid me wait for him and vanished. With much fear I waited, but when he returned all was well. He said those you wish to speak with will meet us and named the time and place."

"Where and when?" asked Ghuda.

To Borric, Suli said, "The time is the second ringing of the watchbell after sundown. The place is but a short walk from here. I know it because he made me repeat

They rose and left, following Suli to the nearest market square. Borric was again astonished at the press of humanity around him, and the diversity of it. If he felt foolish, no one took note of his impersonation of a Bendrift. The array of costumes, and lack thereof, he saw in Farafra was even more varied in the Empire's capital. The blackest skin Borric had ever seen gleamed in the late afternoon sun as lion hunters of the grassy plains walked by, and yet there were enough fair-skinned people to show that those who once lived in the Kingdom had come to Kesh over the years. Many had the narrow eyes and yellowish skin that Nakor possessed, but their dress was in different fashion than the Isalani—some wearing silk jackets and knee breeches, others wearing armor, and still others in simple monk's robes. Women in all states of dress, from the most modest to almost naked passed by, and few took notice, unless the wornai) was unusually striking.

A pair of Ashuntai plainsmen sauntered by, each lead-

"Brijaners—seamen from Brijane, and the towns along the shore below the Grimstone Mountains. They're raiders and traders who ply the Great Sea from Kesh to the Eastern Kingdoms in their long ships—and even across the Endless Sea, the stories claim. They are proud, violent men, and they worship the spirits of then-dead mothers. All Brijaner women are seers and priestesses, and the men believe their ghosts come to guide their ships and therefore hold all women sacred. The Ashuntai treat women worse than dogs. If it wasn't for the Empress's peace seal being on the city, they'd be trying to kill one another on sight."

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Borric said, "Wonderful. Are their many such feuds in Kesh?"

Ghuda said, "No more than usual. About a hundred such, give or take a few, on any given festival. That's why the Palace Guards and the Inner Legion,are here

Kesh was a wonder to Borric. The throng in the streets was both familiar and alien. So much of what a city was was familiar to him, but this city was overlaid with ages of an alien culture.

When they entered the market, Borric said, "This is pretty impressive."

Ghuda snorted. "This is a local market. Madman. The big one is across from the amphitheater. That's where most travelers will go."

Borric shook his head. Glancing around, he said to Suli, "When should we leave?"

"We have a while, master." As he spoke, a dozen chimes and gongs around the city rang, as the sun vanished over the horizon. "The second bell, so it will be an hour."

Despite the early hour of the night, the alley was deserted. The narrow corridor was cluttered with trash and garbage, and the stench was overwhelming. Trying to keep the greasy meat and flatbread he had eaten down, Borric said, "A friend once told me that thieves will often put garbage and"—stepping on what ap-

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peared to be a dead dog, Borric continued—"other things along their private escape routes to discourage casual inspection."

At the end of the alley was a door, wooden with a metal lockplate. Borric tried it and found it locked. Then from behind, a voice said, "Good evening."

Borric and Ghuda turned, and pushed Suli and Nakor behind them. A half-dozen armed men were approaching them down the alley. Ghuda hissed. "I have a very

apparent in the dim light in the alley. The others behind him were shadowy silhouettes. "What is your proposal?"

"I need entrance into the palace."

Several men laughed. "That is easy," said the leader. "Get arrested and they will take you before the High Tribune, assuming you break an Imperial law. Murder a guard—that always works."

"I need to get in unseen."

"Impossible. Besides, why should we help? You may be Imperial agents for all we know. You do not speak like a Bendrifi, despite your dress. The city has been crawling with agents looking for someone—who we don't know, so you may be him. In any event," he said, drawing a longsword, "you have about ten seconds to explain why we shouldn't just kill you and take your gold now."

alley. "And?"

"And I bring greetings from the Upright Man of Krondor."

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The leader paused a moment, then said, "Impres-

sive.

Borric let out a breath of tension, then the leader of the thieves said, "Very impressive. For the Upright Man has been seven years dead in Krondor and the Mockers are now ruled by the Virtuous Man. Your introduction is less than timely, spy." To his men, he said, "Kill them."

The alley was too narrow to allow Ghuda to draw his

Borric's sword took the first man in the throat, as Ghuda was forced to use his two dirks to parry his attacker's longer sword. Suli had never used a sword before, but he flailed about with enough conviction that the man opposite him was reluctant to try to get past the blurring weapon.

The attackers fell back a step at the death of one of their number. They were reluctant to rush Borric's sword point again. The cluttered alley gave no one an advantage, save time. The attackers could hang back and let Borric's party tire then take them, for they had no place else to go, so the thieves were content to feint and withdraw, feint and withdraw.

Nakor rummaged through his rucksack and found what he was looking for. Borric glanced over his shoulder for an instant, to see the Isalani pry the lid off a flat jar. "What . . . ?" he began, then he was forced to pay the price of his inattention as a broadsword almost took his left arm off. He dodged and thrust, and a second

plate. As the powder passed through the lock, a series of

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audible clicks could be heard. Nakor stood up with a satisfied smile, put away his jar, and opened the door. "We can go now," he calmly announced.

Instantly, Ghuda shoved him unceremoniously through the door and followed after, as Borric launched a flurry of blows that drove back the thieves, allowing Suli to bolt through the door after the mercenary. Then Borric was through and Ghuda slammed the door behind him. Nakor held out a large, ornate chair, which Borric jammed against the door handle, barring the door for a moment.

Borric turned and was suddenly aware of two facts:

the first was a nearly nude girl regarded him with eyes years older than the rest of her, from where she sat

ken in, three large men—the establishment's resident bruisers—each armed with clubs in hand, knives, and swords at their belts, materialized in the hall. "What passes here, scum?" shouted the first, his eyes wide in anticipation of a little free bloodletting. Borric was instantly convinced that whatever he said, the man's intent was bloody.

Borric pushed himself past Ghuda, shoving the mercenary's dirk point down in clear message not to start trouble. Glancing over his shoulder, Borric said, "City watch! Trying to break in that door."

He slid past the first man, just as the thieves outside obliged by hitting the door, causing the chair to move a foot.

^ "Those thieving bastards!" said the first bruiser.
"We're paid up this month."

Borric gave the man a friendly shove toward the door

you haven't paid."

By now several clients of the establishment were opening doors and peeking into the halls to see what was happening. At sight of armed men, several doors were slammed, then one girl screamed, and the panic was on.

The third bruiser said, "Wait a minute, you," to Borric and took a swipe with his club.

Borric barely got his left arm up in time, and took the blow on his left bracer, but the shock still numbed his arm to the elbow. Thinking of nothing else to do, the Prince shouted, "Raid!" at the top of his lungs, and every door in the hall flew open. The third bruiser tried to take another swipe at Borric, but Ghuda struck him behind the ear with the hilt of his dirk, stunning the man.

Borric shoved the third bruiser hard into a fat mer-

At that moment, Suli shouted, "City watch!" as loud as he could.

Then the rear door flew open and the thieves barged in, collided with naked girls and boys, drugged men, and two very angry bruisers. The commotion in the hall was redoubled with another pair of large men appearing at the top of the hall, demanding to know what was going on. Borric shouted, "Religious fanatics! Trying to free your slave girls and boys. Your men are being untacked, back there. Help them!"

Somehow, Ghuda, Suli, and Nakor extricated themselves from the confusion in the hall and bolted for the entry of the building. The nude merchant running down the street had piqued the curiosity of the city watch, and two armed guardians of the peace were

Within seconds of the shrill whistle sounding, ten more city guardsmen were hurrying to the riot and dashing through the door.

Two blocks away, in a dark inn, Borric and his companions sat at a table. Ghuda took off his helm and almost bounced it off the table, so hard did he put it down. Pointing his finger at Borric, he said, "The only reason I don't knock your head off now is that we'd certainly get arrested."

"Why do you keep wanting to hit me?" said Borric.

"Because you keep doing stupid things which threaten to get me killed, Madman!"

Nakor said, "That was fun."

Ghuda and Borric both stared at him in astonishment.

"Fun?" said Ghuda.

Chapter Fifteen

Snares

Eriand approached the door.

A dozen guards stood without, but none sought to question him about his approach to the Princess Sharana's private quarters. At the entrance to the reception area, Eriand discovered Lord Nirome, the noble who had acted as Master of Ceremonies when Prince Awari had greeted him at the entrance to the upper city.

The stout man smiled affably as he bowed, and said, "Good evening. Your Highness. Is all here to your liking?"

Eriand smiled and returned the bow with a deference beyond what Nirome's rank entitled him to, say-

of view of the guards and servants, saying, "Only a moment. I would not like to keep the Princess waiting."

"Understood, Highness, understood." He smiled and something in Eriand said to beware of this friendly bungler, that no one could be this highly placed and not have some guile. "What I wished to say, Highness, is that it would be a kind and generous act, a kingly act, if you would communicate to Her Imperial Majesty your desire to see young Rasajani, Lord Kilawa's son, pardoned for his offense against you." Eriand said nothing, and when it was obvious he wasn't going to speak, Nirome continued. "The boy is stupid; on that point we agree. However, the fault lies not with him but with certain provocateurs in Prince Awari's camp." Glancing

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around as if wary of being overheard, Nirome said, "If I may elaborate a brief instant." Eriand nodded. Nirome whispered, "Awari is second born to Sojiana, so by rights

cause he is foremost in insisting peace be kept between our two nations. It was a rash and foolish act, one which really was unforgivable, but I am certain others put him up to it, thinking Awari would approve. If you could somehow find it in your heart to forgive. ..."

Eriand said nothing for a few moments, then at last spoke. "I shall consider the matter. I will discuss it with my advisors, and if we are certain no loss of prestige for my nation is involved, I will speak to your Empress."

Nirome grabbed Eriand's hand, and kissed his royal signet. "Your Highness is most gracious. Perhaps someday I may be privileged to visit Rillanon. When I do, I shall gladly tell all there that a gracious and wise ruler is destined to govern them."

Eriand had about all the fawning he could stand, so he nodded and left the portly court noble, moving purposefully toward the entrance to the Princess Sharana's suites. Presenting himself to the servant who waited, he

Eriand indicated she should lead him and as she did, he found himself admiring the graceful sway of hips barely covered by the short kilt. Feeling himself becoming aroused at thoughts of this evening's encounter, Eriand focused on James's parting words to him, just

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after dinner. The Earl of his father's court had said "Remember, like yourself, she's destined to rule her nation, so don't take anything for granted. She may look like a twenty-two-year-old girl, and even act like one, but she may be Empress of Kesh in your lifetime and I suspect her education is as extensive, or more so, than yours." James had revealed an unusual level of concern, even for one as cautious by nature as he was. And he had taken the moment to tell Eriand, "Be wary. Don't be led astray by pretty promises in soft arms, my friend. There's murder in these people as much as in the soul of any street thug in the Poor Quarter of

sions, Sharana wore only a simple robe, clasped just above her breasts by a golden falcon in the same design he had seen upon the Royal Keshian standard. The robe was almost transparent and fell open in front as she rose to greet him, giving Eriand a tantalizing view of the young woman's body. The effect was considerably more powerful than the commonplace nudity in the palace. Eriand bowed slightly, the deference given a host by a guest, rather than the bow of a subject to a ruler. Sharana extended her hand and he took it as she simply said, "Come, walk with me."

Eriand found his reaction upon first seeing the Princess returning. In a flower garden of exotic blossoms, she was both the most lovely and exotic. Unlike most of the trueblood women he had encountered so far, she was not lithe and long-legged, but more voluptuous. Her legs were thicker than Miya's, but not unpleasantly so, and she was easily the most large-breasted woman he had met so far. There was an odd tilt to her nose which, combined with her full lips, gave her a pouty

rounded in a pleasing way. Eriand was finding himself totally captivated by the young woman.

When the silence became oppressive to the nervous Prince, he said, "Your Highness, are there any ... unattractive women at court?"

Sharana laughed. "Of course." Her voice was sweet and feminine and her smile brought her face alive and made Eriand's pulse beat faster. "But my grandmother has a terror of old age and death, so at her command all those not young and beautiful are relegated to the lower levels of the palace. They are there, to be sure." Sharana sighed. "If I come to rule, I will abolish that silly order. Many fine and capable people work in obscurity, while those less gifted but fairer to look upon achieve high office."

Eriand didn't really understand what the girl was saying. His mind was fixed upon the lovely scent of her mixing with the exotic aroma of the garden's flowers.

"He's my mother's cousin, actually, but I call him my uncle. He's the only one who could get me to stop crying when I was left alone as a baby. Grandmother has constantly had to scold him to do something about his love of eating and look more like a trueblood hunter, but she puts up with him anyway. I often think he's the only one who keeps this Empire together—he really does his best to disarm potential conflicts. He's tried to be a good influence upon my uncle Awari. . . ." She left it unsaid that most would have considered that undertaking a failure.

Eriand nodded. "Why are your uncle and grandmother estranged?"

"I'm not sure," answered the girl, taking Eriand's hand in hers, a natural and unself-conscious act.

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Eriand felt his blood pounding but he forced himself to concentrate on matters of politics, which was difficult with the scantily clad Princess constantly brushing against him. "So, ah, some of your people wish a male ruler?"

"Silly, isn't it?" Sharana halted and said, "What do you think of my garden?"

"It's impressive," Eriand admitted, without any flattery. "Nothing like this in Isles."

"Many of these blooms are cultivated here, for the Imperial gardens, and do not exist anywhere else upon Midkemia. I'm not sure how that's done, but I've been told it's so." She reached across her own body with her left hand and squeezed his forearm, holding onto his left hand with her right. It was a familiar gesture, of lovers, and Eriand was both aroused and discomforted by it.

Sharana giggled. "But you have so many wonders I have been told that you have spoken to elves, and that you have fought the Dark Brotherhood. Is this true?"

Eriand himself had never spoken to elves or fought the Brotherhood of the Dark Path, as most people referred to the *moredhel*—the dark elves—but he decided it wouldn't help to embellish the truth a bit. He had fought goblins at Highcastle and they were the next best thing.

He spoke a bit and found Sharana to be fascinated by his stories, or at least give a convincing performance as

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one fascinated. After a while, they had circled the garden and returned to Sharana's pavilion. Sharana indicated the large bed outside her sleeping quarters. "I

prefer sleeping under the stars most nights during the

from flying Mg"1 insects. "So Miya told me." Eriand felt himself blush as Sharana said, "She said that you are quite . • gifted in some respects. And quite a lot of fun." Motioning for Eriand to recline at her side, she ran a finger around the collar of his tunic. "You wear so many clothes, you men of the North. You're almost as bad as our fierce Brijaner sea rovers. They refuse to remove their fur cloaks, even to growing faint in the heat. And they think their lives are ruled by the ghosts of their dead mothers, and only take one wife in their lifetime. They are very strange. You would be more comfortable if you took some clothing off, don't you think?"

Eriand found himself actually blushing. He had assumed from the timing of the meeting and his previous experience with Keshian trueblood girls that the Princess might have something more personal than an informal state visit in mind when she asked him to visit her quarters, but now he felt suddenly awkward.

garment, Sharana rolled over on her back. As he took position over her, he realized the four serving women were still stationed around the pavilion, and the gauzy hangings offered only an illusion of privacy. Borric felt a momentary hesitation as he saw one of the servants

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standing only a few inches away, but as the Princess pulled him to her, he gave no more thought to her presence. I must be getting used to these people, he thought, before he lost himself in a warm and sensuous world. Their lovemaking was intense and hurried, as if neither could wait to reach satisfaction.

When they were both spent, Eriand moved to Sharana's side and the girl playfully ran her hand over his chest and stomach. "Miya said you start quickly."

Eriand felt himself blush again and said, "Do . . . did you and Miya discuss me ... in great detail?"

Sharana began doing interesting things with her left hand while lying next to Eriand, her right arm forming a triangle as she rested her head on her right hand. "Oh, she said that you were . . . enthusiastic . . . and a little impatient . . . the first time . . . but that the second time was well worth the effort."

Eriand laughed as he reached out and grabbed Sharana, pulling her to him. "Let's see if she was right."

The heralds blew their long horns, and the drums began beating. Eriand and his company sat in one of the boxes used by the Keshian nobility the previous night, the guests of Prince Awari and Lord Nirome. As the second day of the Empress's Jubilee got underway, contests and exhibitions were scheduled. The Empress might or might not appear in her private box, overlooking the amphitheater, but the games continued as if she were there. Short, muscular men were dressed in the costumes of their warrior ancestors. Each man wore a

tles made from animal skulls, and horn trumpets were played with enthusiasm as the warriors began their ancient contest.

A stone of seven feet in height was pulled out to the center of the amphitheater by a dozen men, singing a strange repetitive chant. Others urged them on with cries, grunts, and exaggerated gestures.

Eriand turned to his host and said, "I am pleased for the opportunity to spend some time with Your Highness."

Awari smiled graciously and said, "The pleasure is mine, Your Highness."

Lord Nirome, sitting behind Eriand, and next to James and Gamina, said, "Anything to build bridges between our two nations. Your Highnesses."

Awari said, "I guess news has not been swift in reaching you. A fleet of Quegan galleys had been raiding the Free Cities and even being so bold as to raid some of your coastal towns near Questor's View. Your father ordered Admiral Bruhall's fleet to find and sink them. He did."

Nirome chimed in. "A squadron of the raiders was blown by squall past their own island and were intercepted by a squadron of Imperial ships out of Durbin and were also crushed."

At this, James and Eriand exchanged glances, and Eriand heard Gamina's voice in his mind./owes is fascinated by that.

Why? Aloud the Prince said, "Then the Bitter Sea should be safe to travel for some time to come. Barring a Uurbin pirate or two."

Awari smiled indulgently. "Some of our more distant

place a corrupt judge there, do you see?" The tone of the question showed clearly it was rhetorical.

Then James's voice came to Eriand. This is intriguing. What was an "Imperial squadron" doing in Durbin? Those pirates usually can't agree on anything, let alone how to organize ten or more ships into a squadron.

Gamina spoke to Nirome. "My lord, what are these men doing?"

"These are men from Shing Lai, Dong Tai, and Tao Zi, many villages and towns in the region, who in ancient times were known as the P6-Tao. They are no longer warriors, but they still practice the ancient arts and craft of war. These men are wall jumping."

As he spoke, the first man in line raced for the large stone, then as he came within a stride of it, he sprung as high as he could, placing his foot on the face and flip-

James said, "That stone is how tall? Seven feet?"

"Yes," said Awari. "An adequate warrior will leap to the top, touching the stone, then land on the other side. A true warrior will clear the height without touching the stone. In ancient days, this was training for their soldiers, so they might jump the protective walls of rival villages."

"That is impressive," said Eriand.

Awari smiled. "They used to plant spears on both sides of the wall stone, giving the contestants a bit more motivation in making the jump clean. Anyway, as I was saying, now that that nest of pirates up in Queg has been slapped down, I'm hoping things will stay calm along the northern borders. I don't mean to bother you with the details of our domestic difficulties, but with my mother's age . . ." He watched a moment as a strong-looking man in a wooden demon's mask, with a spear in

Eriand said, "As long as I live, I hope that is so."

Awari said, "Good. Let's hope you live a long, full span of years."

A flourish of trumpets announced the arrival of a member of the royal family, and Eriand turned, hoping it was Sharana. Instead, the Princess Sojiana entered with her retinue, and Eriand could barely contain his laugh of astonishment. Escorting the beautiful woman to her place in the box next to the one he occupied with Awari was Baron Locklear.

James's amusement came behind his thoughts, too. Well, it seems that no barrier is insurmountable/or our friend, doesn 't it?

It does appear that way, replied Eriand.

The Princess was the first to enter the box, and be-

He's trying to keep up appearances, but he's deeply disturbed about something.

What is that? asked James.

He said he'll speak to us later, that right now he's having difficulty concentrating. But he's saying one thing now. He thinks Sojiana may have been behind the attempt on Borric in Krondor.

Eriand nodded absently to some observation Lord Nirome was making. To Gamina, and through her James and Locklear, he said. Then that makes her a prime candidate behind the raid that killed Borric.

As if she somehow overheard, the Princess turned and regarded Eriand with a frankly appraising look, as if trying to measure him against whatever reports her

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before he hadn't dreamed of, and he wished he could speak with his father.

The various exhibitions had followed a martial theme, with warriors from distant corners of the Empire showing their Empress and her court their finest young men. The last exhibition was less a demonstration of martial arts as much as it was a ritual. Two companies of warriors were competing in a contest, the origins of which were lost in time. Two villages had been selected by the Governor of Jandowae to present the Battle of Dragons. Two large dragons, marvelously fashioned from rope, tied in coils and knots to the actual size of the creature, were carried upon the backs of hundreds of warriors. The rival villagers were wearing cane and bone armor, centuries old in design and nothing that would withstand modern iron weapons. Each man's helm was bedecked in bright ribbons, one side red, the other blue, and each rope dragon had a brightly carved mask on the front of the same color. Upon the back of each of the two dragons riders in ornate and brightly painted ar-

them higher and higher, until the riders were easily fifty feet in the air. Then the large figures would fall to the ground. Eventually, Eriand had been told, one of the two riders would gain a height advantage over the

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other and seize the plume from his opponent's helm, ending the contest.

Eriand found it strangely compelling. The two forces had closed a half-dozen times, with one side or the other feigning and dodging away before the first clash. They had actually come in contact three times now, without either rider getting the other's plume before being forced to jump away and try again. Eriand was also impressed on how the riders could make the jump, from a height of twenty-five or so feet, in armor, and not be hurt.

At last the contest ended, with the red side prevail-

Eriand had gotten so used to the mind speech that he almost answered aloud. He covered by feigning a cough, then said, "Perhaps we should have a quiet meal tonight, my lord Earl?"

James shrugged as if it was nothing important. "Well, we've another fifty-eight days of festivities, so we should marshal our resources. Perhaps that would be best, after all."

Kafi, who had been at his usual post, said, "Then, Highness, I shall bid you good evening and return to my quarters in the lower city. I shall return at dawn for your pleasure."

"Thank you. Lord Abu Harez," said Eriand, with a slight bow.

As Eriand's party returned to its quarters, nothing of consequence was said, either aloud or by mind-speech. Reaching the entrance to the wing they were housed

attend those functions which are absolutely vital. Today was not much different than a harvest festival, really."

"True—"

Further conversation was cut off by the appearance of a soldier, dressed in trueblood fashion, but without the colorful headdress. This one wore a very functional-looking helm, and his sandals were -replaced with boots and greaves. Upon his chest he wore a leather vest, and a very well-tended sword hung from his belt. "My lords," he said, without waiting for permission to speak. "She Who Is Kesh commands your presence at once."

Eriand felt himself flush in surprise and irritation.

"Commands—?"

James put a restraining hand upon Eriand's shoulder, preventing him from making any rash statement to the guard. "We shall accompany you now," he said.

most looking grim and concerned.

When they entered the Empress's audience hall, the vast central chamber of the palace, the full roster of Lords and Masters was present in the upper gallery, which surrounded the Empress's dais. Court officials mobbed the floor below, leaving only a straight path to the dais. It was down this path Eriand and his companions marched.

When they reached the foot of the dais, Eriand and James bowed, while Gamina curtsied. Without preamble, the Empress said, "Would His Highness care to tell us why we just received word that your father is marshalling his Armies of the West in the Vale of Dreams!"

Eriand felt his mouth open, then he shut it. He glanced at James, whose expression of astonishment matched his own. At last Eriand said, "Majesty, I have no notion of what you are saying."

ter of your brother's death. Not content to assume the role of monarch, and to negotiate some sort of indemnity, he instead takes the role of bereaved father, and orders his vassals into the field. Your uncle Martin and his garrisons from Crydee, Tulan, and Carse have just landed on the shores southeast of Shamata. Five thousand Royal Krondorian Lancers join them, and our reports tell us another ten thousand foot from the garrisons of Sarth, Questor's View, Ylith, and Yabon march south, and full three thousand Tsurani from LaMut march with them. Elements of the garrisons at Darkmoor and Malac's Cross also are on the march. Will you please tell me what thirty thousand Isles soldiers are doing massing on our borders if this is not a prelude to invasion!"

Eriand could not believe what he was hearing. James stepped forward and said, "If Your Imperial Majesty will permit—"

"I will permit nothing!" shouted the old woman. Her

learned to control himself. Or by the gods, he'll mourn another son should one Isleman cross into Kesh with violence toward my people in his heart. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, Your Majesty," answered Jimmy.

Half-pulling Eriand along, he led him out of the court. Along the entire route from the dais to the front door, the glare of eyes upon them was near palpable, and there was nothing of kindness in anyone's stare. They were as isolated and alone as was imaginable.

At the entrance to the royal court, a company of Household Guards waited to escort them back to their

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own quarters. As they moved back through the gigantic palace, Eriand sent his words to James via Gamina. What are we now? Prisoners or guests?

need of me."

Eriand nodded absently as he tried to imagine what could possibly bring his father to this incredible decision. Even if Arutha didn't have some personal experience with Kesh, as Eriand had, he read the intelligence personally, rather than simply leaving it to Gardan and James to advise him. He knew the scope of Kesh's power should she bring it to bear upon the Kingdom. The Kingdom's independence from Kesh had always rested upon one point: Kesh couldn't afford the losses she would endure to invade a nation a third her own size. And the mauling the Kingdom would inflict upon Kesh to enjoy whatever brief victory she might enjoy would make her vulnerable in turn to revolt by the Confederacy, or attack from the Eastern Kingdoms.

But never for a moment did Kesh live in fear of military adventure from the Kingdom. An occasional border clash over the lands in the rich Vale of Dreams had certainly become commonplace in the history of the

Since that time, no confrontation of major proportion had occurred. But the specter of the Kingdom invading the Empire was never imagined, for if the consequences of invading the Kingdom would be ruinous to Kesh, the

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Kingdom's consequences for invading the Empire would be even more disastrous.

Drawing his attention to the present, Eriand became aware of Nirome's having said something. "Forgive me, my lord, my mind was elsewhere. What did you say?"

"I said. Highness, that you will certainly wish to send messages to your father at once. I shall have dispatch riders ready to leave at your convenience."

"Thank you," said Eriand.

James controlled his urge to say something nasty and merely smiled. "Thank you."

From Gamina Eriand heard, James says there is something terribly wrong here.

Of course there is, replied Eriand.

They reached the wing of the palace where their own quarters were and saw that the passages between the rooms given over to the Prince and his party were at least without guards between the entrances. "At least we can visit one another," observed Eriand.

"Yes," answered James. "Now, the question of the moment is where is Locklear?"

With bitter humor, Eriand spoke, as he accompanied James and Gamina into their own quarters. "Even money says he is once again entertaining the Princess Sojiana."

Gamma he sent, Are we being watched again?

Gamina glanced around, then said. The magic device is upon us once again.

They sat in the receiving room and James signaled for

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the servants to place some refreshments upon a nearby table and leave them in privacy. When they were gone, James poured all three of them wine.

See if you can determine who is controlling it, said James, and Eriand knew that Gamina had established the odd three-way mind-link. It was something she did only when she could sit and not speak, as the strain was too great otherwise. Most of the time in public she simply relayed messages.

Gamina closed her eyes as if she had a headache,

Nearby, she answered. In a complex of rooms on the other side of the garden that opens on to your rooms is the most likely place, Eriand.

Eriand nodded. "I think after a bit I'll retire. This has been a most distressing day."

"Yes," agreed James. So what do you think of this invasion?

Aloud, so that any eavesdroppers might hear him, he said, "This invasion is clearly nonsense."

James raised one eyebrow, but followed Eriand's lead. "I think so, too, but what is your reasoning?"

"Father would never let anything, especially personal grief or anger, lead him to make so rash and destructive a decision."

That's my thinking, too, sent James. Aloud he said,

James glanced at Eriand with a momentary pride in the youngster's reason, then said, "Those are the two obvious choices." Silently he said, You realize, of course,

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the significance of the second choice, if that is the correct one?

What? asked Eriand.

It means our courier system, and more, our intelligence system here in Kesh, has been compromised.

Of course, said Eriand, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the arm of his chair. If the system has been compromised, then any intelligence we've gotten from any of our sources here is suspect. Nothing we have been told since before we left on this journey is trustworthy.

James. We can't even see if the alleged staging of soldiers is true or false.

Gamina stretched theatrically, saying, "Perhaps we'll be a little more intelligent if we turn in."

Time to do some work on our own, said James.

Eriand's look was questioning. What do you have in mind?

It's been years since I've had to run the roofs of the palace looking for murderers, but I've not forgotten how to climb.

Eriand grinned, the first genuinely amused expression out of him for days. Jimmy the Hand is coming out of retirement.

Something like that. I want to see who is listening in on us, and I can best do that alone.

what is occurring up there."

Eriand bowed to Gamina. "My lady, I trust your headache is passed by morning."

"I'm certain it will be. Highness."

Eriand quickly made his way to his own quarters and

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discovered he had no need to send a message for Sharana, as the Princess lay waiting upon his bed. Her court garments, the white kilt and vest, and her jewelry were piled neatly upon an ottoman at the foot of the bed. Smiling at Eriand, she patted the cushion next to her, saying, "I was certain you were going to be in council with your people all night long."

Eriand tried to smile, but it was a weak effort. "I appreciate your desire to spend time with me, Sharana,

"Of course, but—"

She put her fingers upon his lips, then kissed him, long and lingeringly. "We can talk later. I don't want to be deprived of you one moment longer."

Eriand knew there were important issues to be discussed, but quickly he found himself agreeing with the Princess. . . . They could be discussed more calmly later.

Chapter Sixteen

Stalking

Borric watched the fireworks.

From the open front of the inn, he, Ghuda, and Nakor had a fairly good field of view, as most of the crowd was on the other side of the plaza, which opened on the vast

Suli appeared and slid onto the bench next to Borric, picking up the cup of ale waiting for him. One thing the boy could do better than any of them was get information; he might be a poor thief, but Suli was an exceptional beggar, which meant he was halfway to being a rumormonger.

"There is something strange happening, master," he whispered.

At this Ghuda's attention was caught. The mercenary had been in a foul mood since the abortive attempt to gain the help of the local thieves. He was now convinced that two groups, the Imperial Guards and the thieves, were actively searching for them, and their lives would be measured in minutes, hours at best. He had resigned himself to dying without seeing a single copper of the money Borric had promised him, let alone having the opportunity to enjoy spending it.

Many guards race from one place to another, while others do nothing. It's as if something big is happening, like a war or revolt or sudden disease. But there's no hint of what it might be from the places you would hear of such a thing, the caravan drivers and boatmen, there is no talk of trouble in the inns and whorehouses. And there are the very odd comings and goings of servants in the palace."

Something struck Borric. "What do you mean by 'odd comings and goings of servants in the palace'?"

Suli shrugged. "As best as I can understand it, master, the servants who are not trueblood are gone from the palace after the evening meal, usually before midnight. But for some reason many are heading back into the palace from the Lower City. And fires can be seen in the cook-buildings, as if a great deal of food is being prepared for many hundreds of people. Those who would be cooking the morning meal would not usually undertake to do so for another seven hours."

their retinue, many thousands of people are upon the plateau who normally wouldn't be there at this hour." He thought about what this might mean. "How do they enter this upper city? Up that long road?"

Suli shrugged. "I can find out." He slipped out of his seat and headed back into the plaza, which was filling up with citizens now that the festivities were over. Usually, most shops would be closed by this hour, just two hours before midnight, but the presence of the throng of celebrants had caused many of the businesses besides ale shops, wine sellers, inns, and brothels to remain open. Borric found it a little odd. The crowd was the match of anything he had ever seen in Krondor at high noon, yet it was four hours after sundown.

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Ghuda said, "What insanity are you thinking of now, Madman?"

them on the slave block. Imperial justice is fair: it punishes everyone equally, regardless of guilt or innocence."

Time seemed to drag for the twenty minutes Suli was gone. When he at last returned, Suli looked puzzled. "It's odd, master, but it seems every entrance to the upper city is open, so that those who need to return may do so by the quickest route."

Borric's eyes narrowed. "That many entrances? What about guards?"

Suli shrugged. "There weren't any at the four or five entrances I saw, master."

Borric rose and put on the black leather gloves that were part of his disguise. Overnight he had undergone his third metamorphosis in the last week, thanks to Nakor's bag and what was left of the money made from selling Imperial horses. Now his short white hair was

Ghuda had resisted any attempt to get him to change his armor and clothing, counting it as useless in the face of certain destruction. He had bought a new red tunic more to halt Borric's nagging than out of any real belief it would help them avoid eventual capture by either the thieves or the Imperial Guards looking for Borric.

When they were all standing, Borric turned and

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made his way across the plaza. Wending their way through the crowd, they reached the boulevard, which was still roped off and guarded to prevent the denizens of the lower city from entering the street, which would again be used the next day for the morning procession. Borric peered across the now empty boulevard and saw dozens of buildings with lights burning'. Many had their doors open wide. A man hurried across the street, and a guardsman moved to intercept him. They spoke briefly

Borric glanced around, seeing several more guards stopping those attempting to cross the street. "There's a little too much activity around this street. Let's find another way."

As Ghuda followed the Prince he said, "Another way what?"

"You'll see," answered Borric.

"That's what I was afraid you would say," Ghuda answered.

Borric followed the edge of the boulevard as it bordered the gigantic plateau that put this quarter of the city into dusk a few hours after noon. Where another large street intersected, Borric saw what he was looking for. "There!" he said, indicating with a motion of his head.

"What?" said Ghuda.

across the street, expecting someone to shout, but his dark armor must have convinced the other soldiers a half-block away that he was one of them. His compan-

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ions were only a step behind, so it looked as if he escorted them;

Entering the large doorway, they saw a ramp leading upward into the dark, with torches spaced along the walls every hundred feet or so. Ghuda said, "Now what

are we doing?"

"We are walking into the palace, answered the

Princ*6

"And how do we do that?" asked Ghuda.

where they entered and saw nothing. "When you are where you don't belong, you gawk about, looking this way and that, and you stand with shoulders round, and to anyone who does belong, you look out of place. If you walk with eyes forward, erect, and purposefully, servants and guards assume you know where you are going. They are not about to stop you and interrogate you, for fear of their instinct about you being correct; they don't want to be punished for interfering with someone who is where he is supposed to be.

"It's officers and lower-level officials you have to be cautious of. The officers are likely to halt anyone they don't recognize—though with the influx of several thousand strangers, that's unlikely. What could get us caught would be a minor official, full of himself, who is anxious to prove he's somebody important."

Ghuda said, "Sounds good. Madman. But then so did your idea about contacting the thieves."

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So, I can go back and wait for someone to recognize me, or get caught here. But there's always the chance the impossible is happening and you're finally doing something right, in which case I might survive and get my money. That's why I'm still here."

Borric glanced back along the tunnel as the echo of distant footfalls came toward them; "Suli? Do you want to leave now?"

The boy was frightened, but shook his head no. "You are my master and I am your servant. I will go with you."

Borric put his hand upon the boy's shoulder a moment, then looked at Nakor. "And what about you, wizard?"

in the broad corridors was not that much less than a busy city boulevard on trading day. The hurrying stream of people down nearly every corridor they passed helped them avoid detection. So far, Borric's assertion that if they but looked the part of people who belonged there no one would challenge them had proven correct.

The problem proved to be that none of them had a hint as to where they were going. To ask directions was to risk discovery, for anyone who was there by rights would certainly know where he was bound.

They had been in the palace over an hour now. It was getting close to midnight and while the Keshian business day had ended only a couple of hours earlier, it was well past the time when most honest citizens were in bed.

Borric led them toward an area which seemed less congested, then down a side passage toward what ap-

Borric sat down on the edge of the fountain and said, "I think I need to scout around, but not until things have quieted down a little." He removed his cloak and his leather armor, saying, "And if I'm going to move around the way I want, this is going to have to stay here." He glanced around the garden, noting a stand of deep shrubs and ferns which bordered one wall. "If you hide over there, you'll only be noticed if someone comes looking for you."

Ghuda was about to reply when a gong reverberated in the distance. "What was that?"

Within a few seconds, another sounded, then another. Suddenly gongs were ringing close by and the sound of people running down the hall could be heard. Grabbing his armor, Borric raced for the hedge and half-dove into it. Hunkering down with his companions, he said, "Damn! I wonder if they're looking for us?"

but rather were lost in a soft, warm doze that came quickly after their lovemaking. Despite her soft appearance, the girl was young, healthy, and fit, and challenged Eriand, leaving him exhausted when they were done. But it was a wonderful exhaustion and he could not imagine anything he would wish for more than to have it last for a very long time.

But her reaction to the sound of the gongs banished that mood in an instant. "What is it?" he asked.

Sharana leaped out of the bed, the servants drawing aside the curtains for her, and said, "Court dress!"

As Eriand fumbled to recover his own clothing, the servants had the Princess's kilt and vest for her in moments. As she fastened the clasp which bound her kilt,

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she said, "It's an alarm. It's a command to seal the uppci

when we called at your quarters. The Empress commands us to bring you to her."

Sharana nodded, and as Eriand moved to come with her, one of the black-armored legionaries said, "We have no orders regarding this one, Highness."

Sharana spun and almost spat as she said, "This one!" Pointing at Eriand she said, "He is the Heir to the throne of Isles! He is royalty!" Her voice was powerful, commanding, and her face flushed with rage. She almost screamed at the man when she shouted, "You will address him as you would my uncle, for he is Awari'h equal in rank! That is -my command!"

Eriand was astonished at the anger in the girl's reaction to the slight, and the ferocity with which she expressed it. He half-expected her to order the man to abase himself, but instead she simply motioned for the company to depart.

Eriand tried to reconcile the sweet and smiling girl who walked beside him now to the shouting one who had dressed down an officer only a moment before, and he couldn't.

They entered the wing of the palace that contained the Court of Light, the formal hall of governing. Eriand had not been inside it before, even when called before the Empress. Always before, they had met in the Empress's audience hall.

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But now he entered the seat of Kesh's government, a place where darkness never intruded, for the hall was constructed with a thousand chandeliers, each with a score of large candles. Light bathed the room. As bright as day, the hall was almost devoid of shadows, for where sunlight came from only one direction, here light came from twenty thousand sources. Even as the business of the court continued, teams of workers low-

of Aber Bukar's Dog Legions. Upon a throne leafed over in gold sat the Empress, resting on cushions made from material of woven gold thread.

Around her on rising seats, tier after tier climbing upward in a semicircle, sat the assembled rulers of Kesh in their Gallery of Lords and Masters. And even as Eriand approached the throne, more were entering the hall, hurrying to their places.

The room was humming with quiet conversation and it took no seer to sense the tone of the meeting was fearful. Something terrible had occurred and the room echoed with the most apprehensive speculation.

When Sharana and Eriand reached the foot of the dais, the Empress's Master of Ceremonies struck the ground with the iron-clad butt of his giant staff.

The falcon that adorned the top of the staff seemed ready to launch itself from the disc of the sun it held in its claws.

act, for in the tradition of the Empire, none mounts the Imperial dais save the Empress's Master of Ceremonies, and then he remains a step below, ready to pass up to

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She Who Is Kesh any documents she might need to peruse. But now she hesitated at the last step, and again her grandmother beckoned Sharana to come to her. When the girl reached her grandmother, she fell to her knees. Lakeisha, Empress of Great Kesh, gathered her granddaughter into her arms and began to cry. The chamber fell to utter silence at the spectacle, as nothing like it had been witnessed by any in attendance.

At last the old woman released her confused and distressed granddaughter and stood. Breathing deep to regain control, the Empress cried out, "Let it be known that murder has been done in my house!" Tears came to her weathered face again, but her voice remained strong. "My daughter is dead."

comed into this house one who has betrayed us, who is serving those who would seek to bring us low!"

Eriand watched from the floor of the hall, and seeing the Empress's eyes fall upon him, glanced about looking for his companions. James and Gamina were standing well to the rear of the vast hall, obviously under guard. Gamma's voice came to him. James says to remain silent no matter what. He thinks we have been made—

Before she could finish the Empress screamed, "Poland! Prince of the House of conDoin, have you come into this nation to do naught but evil?"

Eriand took a breath before speaking, and in a clear, calm voice said, "Make your meaning clear, Lakeisha."

The familiar use of her name was not lost on the Keshian nobles. Eriand was asserting his rank as Heir to the Throne of Isles. He knew that whatever happened, he was assured some protection by his rank and the

Kesh lies dead in her chamber, as you well know. Dead at the hands of your countryman."

Eriand again glanced around the room, but even as he failed to find the face he looked for, he heard the Empress's voice say, "My daughter was murdered by the man you brought to our house, and if it can be shown he did so at your order, your rank and position will mean nothing."

Almost a whisper, Eriand said, "Locklear."

"Yes," shouted the Empress. "Baron Locklear has fled into the night after doing his bloody work. The palace is sealed and the search begins. And when he has been brought before us, we will at last know the truth of this. Now, get you from my sight; I've had enough of the men of Isles for this life."

Eriand stiffly turned and walked out of the chamber, and as he crossed the portal, James and Gamina fell into

his men outside.

Eriand turned to Gamina and silently said. Can you find Locky?

Gamina answered, I can try. She closed her eyes and was motionless for a while, then her eyes opened wide in astonishment and she said aloud, "Borric!"

Eriand said, "What!"

Forcing herself to mind-speech, she said. For a moment . . . just a moment, I thought . . . There was a silence, then she continued, / don't know what that was. For an instant I detected a pattern that was familiar, then just as I recognized it . . . as I thought I recognized it . . . it vanished.

Vanished? asked James.

It must have been a magician. Only a magician could

I was certain. I'll keep seeking for Locklear.

The two men went to a divan and sat, watching as Gamina stood motionless, eyes closed as she sent her mind questing through the vast palace, looking for the familiar mental pattern that was Locklear's. Eriand moved close to James so he could speak in confidence while leaving Gamina undisturbed. "Did you find anything earlier?" he asked, referring to James's intention to sneak out and scout around the palace.

"Nothing. There's too much ground to cover," James whispered. "It took me the better part of a month to discover most of the secret passages in your father's palace and that's one tenth the size of this one."

Eriand sighed. "I thought you might . . . find something."

James shared his disappointment. "So did I."

Sitting back against heavy cushions, Eriand said, "I think there's nothing more we can do tonight but wait." He rose and without another word left James and Gamina.

Borric almost jumped from behind the bushes. "What —" he began, but Ghuda yanked him back down before the guards in the entrance noticed. About five minutes after the alarm bell rang, guards began passing the doorway, all hurrying in one direction. There were both the white-kilted truebloods of the Palace Guards and the black-armored members of the Inner Legion. Borric's only thought was that someone had at last grown suspicious about the odd-looking group wandering through the palace unescorted.

Ghuda said, "What are you trying to do?"

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Borric whispered back, "I thought I heard someone

Borric blinked in confusion. "How do you know this?"

Nakor ignored the question. "But I fixed it. They can't find you now."

Borric was about to pursue the issue when another group of guards in the black of the Inner Legion entered the garden and began methodically searching among the hedges and bushes. Ghuda slowly and methodically pulled his sword from over his shoulder, ready to leap at the first guard who parted the brush behind which they crouched. When the guards were nearly upon them, Nakor leaped up and shouted, "Yeah!"

The closest guard nearly fell over backwards in shock at the sight of this strange, scrawny madman leaping out at him. Then Nakor did a little dance and suddenly a dozen guards were rushing him.

Borric's eyes widened in disbelief as a repeat of the

before anyone knew what was occurring. As arms sought to encircle him, he hit the ground rolling, and as guards dived to tackle him, he leaped into the air. Whenever a grasping hand sought to close upon him, it found only emptiness. And the hooting, gibbering sounds he made only drove the guards to try harder, taunting them into acting rashly.

Finally a Sergeant of the guard bellowed orders and the legionaries spread out to surround Nakor. The little

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man reached into his rucksack and pulled out a small object, about the size of a walnut. As the guardsmen rushed him, he threw it at the ground.

When the device struck the ground, a blinding white light burst forth for an instant, followed by a cloud of white smoke, accompanied by the same nasty sulphur smell Borric had experienced in the Jail at Jeeloge

Borric stood up. "They'll be back when that Sergeant remembers there were others and they hadn't finished searching this garden. We have to find another place to hide and quickly. Come on."

Ghuda snorted in derision. "One place is much the same as another to die, Madman."

Borric looked back at the mercenary for a long moment, then coolly said, "The object of the exercise is nr/ to die, Ghuda."

Ghuda shrugged. "I can't argue that. Where now?" Borric glanced into the hall door and said, "In the opposite direction from where all those guards were heading. If we can circle behind into the area they've already searched, we can buy some time."

He didn't wait for further comment but simply walked into the hall calmly, as if he knew exactly what he was doing. Silently, he wished he did.

was actively attempting it again and seemed bent on

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speeding things along. The only suggestion that offered itself was that whoever the architect of this plot was, he wished to provoke the confrontation while every possible suspect in the Empire was in the city for the Jubilee.

Eriand wished he knew more intimately the names of those who would wish this madness on two nations, for he would gladly have delivered him—or her, he amended; the women in court were as dangerous as the men—trussed like a game bird to the Empress. He considered trying to get a note to Sharana, reassuring her that he had absolutely nothing to do with this violence against her mother.

Then he thought better of it. Even if he had plunged in the knife or put poison in Sojiana's cup himself, he would proclaim his innocence. Then a thought struck

goat, but how to prove it?

Lady Miya entered the quarters and bowed slightly. "Eriand," she said softly, "the Empress has ordered that you be confined to these quarters."

Eriand sat upright, anger suffusing him. "How dare she! Even she would not jeopardize the tradition of diplomatic immunity."

Miya came to sit next to the Prince. "She's lost her daughter. Her advisors are cautioning her that if she harms you or any of your party without leave of your King, she risks reprisals, and no Ambassador will dare enter the borders of Kesh again." The woman sighed and put her arm around Eriand's shoulders. "She'll change her mind in a day or two, I'm certain. Until then, you're free to visit your friends in the other part of this wing, but you can't leave this area without guards and then only to return to the Empress's court should she desire to see you again."

Eriand's eyes narrowed. "Broken? In a fall of some sort?"

The woman shook her head. "No. There were bruises' around her throat. Someone snapped her neck."

Eriand said, "Miya, this is important. Lockleal couldn't have killed your cousin."

Miya studied the Prince's face for a moment, then said, "How can you be certain?"

"Locklear's not the kind of man who would harm a woman, even if he had cause, save to defend himself. But look, even if something ..." Eriand fumbled for words. "Even if something caused him to act . . . unlike himself ... he wouldn't have throttled Sojiana. He's a bladesman, and he'd have used his sword or dagger. He's a skilled fighting man but lacks the brute strength to break a neck. The Princess was not a petite woman. And if she's like her daughter, there's strength

Eriand said, "Those two answers are the same, I fear
And if I'm correct about what has happened, the
Locklear is in danger ... if he isn't already dead "

Miya said, "I think I know someone who can help "

"Who?"

"Lord Nirome. He's always willing to listen to reason
And with Sojiana dead, the strain in the Gallery of Lord'
and Masters will be even greater, for while most would
have accepted Sojiana as the next Empress, many o
those will not accept someone as young as Sharana
Nirome will be anxious to reduce the strain in the court
and finding the Princess's murderer will more than
likely do that faster than anything else."

"I wonder . . ." said Eriand, as he considered some
thing. "Who stands with Awari?"

"Lord Ravi and the others who fear the matriarchy

must halt this madness before it spills over into more

The girl ran off and Eriand sat back. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture Gamina's face and he attempted to send his thoughts to her. After a minute, her voice came into his mind. Yes, Eriand, what is it?

Would you and James please come to my quarters. I think I was premature in planning on sleep. There are some things we need to discuss.

There was a moment of silence, then Gamina said, We're on our way.

Chapter Seventeen

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Borric glanced around the corner.

Seeing no movement in the shadows, he motioned for his companions to follow after him. For the better part

grab a servant and find out where these friends of yours are housed. We can tie the man up—it'll just leave him uncomfortable for a while—then send someone to turn him loose when you've cleared up this bloody mess we're in. What do you think?"

Borric said, "I can't think of a better idea, so we might as well." He glanced about. "We could all do with a short rest."

Ghuda said, "I could use a few minutes off my feet, that's for certain."

"Well, these rooms all seem to be empty." Pointing to the nearest door, he said, "Let's check inside this one."

Borric opened the door as quietly as he could; it was an ornate thing of cane and ivory, and creaked loudly as he pushed on it. After it opened a few inches, he said, "Maybe we should go back to those doors with only curtains?"

for silence. Borric had his rapier out and Suli his short-sword, and Ghuda stepped back, unlimbering his large hand-and-a-half sword. He stepped clear of the other two so he would have room to swing. Borric glanced around the deserted room, making sure there was nothing to trip him up if he had to fight. Not that it mattered:

if he was forced to fight, there would be an unlimited supply of guards as far as the three of them were concerned. His only hope would be to keep from getting killed long enough to convince someone that he really was the other son of Arutha.

Tired, they all sat upon the floor, stretching muscles sore from tension and being on their feet for hours. Ghuda said, "You know, Madman, this sneaking around in the palace gives a man an appetite. I wish I had one of Nakor's oranges right now."

Two men came into view as they moved past the door. One was stout, with a staff of office clutched in his hand. The other was dressed in a black cloak, hiding him from view, but as they passed he turned and Borric caught a glimpse of his face. Both men were intent in conversation and Borric overheard the stout one saying, ". . . tonight. We can't wait any longer. If the Empress's temper fades, she may seek a more reasonable solution. I convinced her to send Awari north in preparation for trouble there, but that ruse will not last long. And there's this business of some maniac running loose in the palace that the guards can't seem to catch. I don't know what that means, but it must be presumed to be trouble. ..." The voice faded as the men turned another corner.

Suli turned and pulled emphatically on Borric's sleeve. "Master!"

What?" said Borric, trying to sort out a rush of images.

Borric leaned back against the door, and nodded.

"That makes evil sense."

Ghuda put up his sword and whispered, "What's this then?"

"I know why trouble's been nipping at our heels since Durbin," muttered Borric.

"What?"

"I'll tell you later. I hope you both had a nice rest. It's over. Right now, we've got to find that servant."

Borric yanked open the door, rendering the squeaky hinge nearly inaudible. He moved out into the hall before Ghuda could question him further. Borric hesitated an instant, while the others moved through the door and closed it. He motioned for Ghuda and Suli to hug the wall.

and whispered, "Someone's coming." He motioned for Ghuda and Suli to move back against the wall, while he moved to the opposite side of the hall.

A lone woman hurried around the corner and Ghuda stepped out to block her progress. "What—" she began, then Borric seized her from behind. The woman was lithe and athletic, but Borric easily kept her under control as he dragged her into the first door in the hall.

Light from a room across from a window gave a faint illumination to the scene. The woman was kept under control as Borric whispered into her ear, "Make an outcry and you'll be hurt. Remain silent and no harm will come to you. Do you understand?"

The woman gave him a single nod and he released her. Turning suddenly, she said, "How dare you—"

teristic of James's farfetched tales was his reference to his "bump of trouble." When something was wrong, Tames somehow sensed it. And for the first time in his life Borric understood what James had been talking about. Something inside of him screamed that there was trouble standing directly before him.

Taking his sword out, he leveled it at the woman. Ghuda said, "Madman, that's not necessary. The woman—"

"Quiet, Ghuda. Woman, what's your name?"

"Miya. I'm a friend of your brother's. He will be so thrilled to discover you still live. What are you doing—"
She laughed, and Borric knew it was as forced as it was artful, for it sounded genuine and spontaneous. "I prattle. It must be the shock of—"

"Seeing me in the palace," Borric finished.

The woman fell silent, and Borric said to Ghuda and Suli, "This is one of those who has been involved in trying to get me killed every step of the way from Krondor to Kesh. She works for Lord Fire."

Miya's eyes widened an instant at the mention of that name, but she gave no other sign of recognition. She said, "If I scream loudly enough, a dozen guards will come here in a moment."

Borric shook his head no. "This wing has already been searched. We slipped behind the lines of those going room to room. Besides, they're looking for one man."

The woman's eyes flashed as she stepped away, her

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glance measuring the distance to the door. "Don't think of it," said Borric. "It would be a close thing, but I'm

"Your father?" said Ghuda. "And just who might he be when he's to home?"

Borric said, "My father's Prince Arutha of Krondor "

Ghuda blinked like an owl caught in the light. "The Prince of Krondor?"

Suli said, "And I am his servant, and will be his servant when he is King of the Isles."

Ghuda stood quietly for a long moment, then said, "Madman . . . Borric . . . Prince, whatever I'm to call you, when this is over remind me I need to knock you down again."

"If we get out of this mess, I'll be happy to stand still while you do it." To Miya he said, "My father is many things, but no fool. He'd no sooner march an army into Kesh than I'd run into a bog of quicksand carrying an

"No."

Borric stepped forward, putting his sword against the woman's throat. When Miya didn't flinch, he said, "So, you have no fear of dying?"

"You're no murderer," spat Miya.

Rough hands moved Borric aside. Ghuda said, "He might not be, bitch." Huge hands gripped the woman's shoulders as he jerked her toward him, and from the expression of discomfort on Miya's face in the gloom, Borric could imagine they were not gentle. Bringing her face scant inches from his own, he whispered, "But

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I'm a different stripe of cat. I have no use for you truebloods and your superior ways. I'd just as soon pet a snake as touch your soft skin. You could be on fire and I

Ghuda released her, and Borne saw tears of terror running down the girl's cheeks. He sheathed his rapier, then pulled his dagger from his belt. Showing her the short blade, Borric then gave her a shove toward the door and said, "Remember, you can't get away. I can throw my dagger faster than you can run."

Miya opened the door and they followed after. As they walked along, Ghuda said, "What tumbled you to her act?"

"My bump of trouble."

"You could have convinced me you didn't have one, for certain," said the mercenary. "I'm glad it finally woke up."

"Me, too."

"But you were already tumbled to something," he

"He's been stalking me since we left Krondor. And he's one of the few in Kesh who would recognize me on sight."

"Who is he?" asked Ghuda, as they rounded a corner into a better-lighted corridor.

As the first pair of sentries standing before doors came into view, Borric moved a step closer to the girl in case she decided to bolt or call for help. To the mercenary he said, "The man was Lord Toren Sie, Kesh's Ambassador to my father's court."

The mercenary shook his head. "He's royal. Some very important people want you dead. Madman."

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"And some very important people want the truth," answered Borric. "That's what's going to keep us alive a little longer."

At the far end of the hall, Miya moved to a large closed door and said, "Your brother is in there."

Borric gave her a shove. "Open it and go through first."

The woman put her hand on the latch and moved it, pushing open the door. She entered and moved the door open wider for Borric. He followed, ahead of Ghuda and Suli.

She led them through a short reception room to another door, where the opening procedure was repeated, but this time, once Suli passed through, she slammed the door behind him, and yelled, "It's Borric of Krondor! Kill him!"

Armed men in the trueblood guard uniform sat around the room and at Miya's words they were on their feet, weapons slipping from scabbards.

apologies."

He's anxious to speak to you alone, Gamina sent to Eriand. In fact, he's very upset we are here.

"Have you any word regarding Baron Locklear?"

Nirome shrugged. "Had we, you would have been advised at once. I must make you understand that most of us who sit in council with Her Majesty are not so

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personally outraged. We lost a cousin at most, while She Who Is Kesh lost a daughter. While mother and daughter were often at odds over court matters, nevertheless the feelings they felt were strong. And as you have no doubt repeated to yourself a hundred times over, there is no logic in any of this."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say," said Eriand.

within your borders, those of Yabon and our former countrymen in your own Crydee, while Kesh is a nation of a thousand languages and customs."

He's stalling for time, James sent via Gamina.

Why?

Gamina answered, He wants to speak with you alone . . . no, he wants to get you alone . . . his mind is racing . . . he's not focusing the way you do when you speak to me . . . he's thinking about . . . Suddenly Gamina's face went white and a second later James almost leaped to his feet, his sword in hand. The stout noble sensed something from Eriand's expression or from the sound of James's standing, but he turned quickly, his staff of office brought before him in a protective gesture.

"What is this?" said Eriand.

James said, "My wife has certain talents, my lord. And among those is sensing falsehood. Now, what part have you been playing in the murder done this night?"

Nirome edged toward the door and James moved to

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cut him off. El-land had his sword out and said, "Where is my brother?"

Nirome sought an exit, and when none was available to him, seemed to visibly wilt. "Mercy, my lord Prince, mercy. I will confess, but you must promise to intercede with the Empress. I did only a minor bit, to further the ambitions of Awari. It was he who 'plotted his sister's death and is planning on killing you and marrying Sharana."

"His own niece?" said Eriand.

Nirome said, "Just so. But if we are to save your friend, we must hurry. He's imprisoned in a lower level of the palace and injured."

James glanced at Gamina and she said, I can't tell

What? asked Eriand.

He's very clever and his mind is very agile. He may not know I can read his surface thoughts, but he suspects some magic is at play and keeps his mind repeating what he has told us. There are hints of other images and some feelings . . he's lying about the scope of his role, but I can't tell how much. You must be wary of him.

Eriand said, "Now, what about Borric being alive?"

Nirome said, "It's thought to be true. A slave escaped within days after being brought to Durbin by desert raiders. It is thought he killed the wife of the Governor

A servant arrived at the doorway and Eriand's attention was drawn away for a moment. Nirome struck out with his staff of office, and far more quickly than his weight promised, he dodged James's blow. Shouting

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"Get the guards!" to the girl, Nirome swung widely with his staff.

The girl hesitated only an instant, then ran screaming for the guards through the doorway. James grabbed at Nirome's arm and got struck with the staff on the shoulder. Eriand jumped forward and grabbed the staff, forcing the heavy courtier back. As the Prince brought his sword up to menace the court officer, guards entered the room.

Instantly swords and spears were leveled at James and Eriand and a guard Captain, in the white kilt of a

Nirome said, "Not just yet. Take them to the empty wing and for the sake of our lives don't let anyone see you doing it! I have to find Miya and Toren Sie and we'll join you."

Suddenly Eriand realized that this stout man of obsequious manner had stationed men loyal to Prince Awari around this wing of the palace—which was how he was able to murder the Princess Sojiana and cast the blame on Locklear.

"You killed Sojiana," Eriand said. "And Locklear."

Nirome's manner changed and he became, instead of the fawning sycophant, a grim-faced man of determination and purpose. Picking up a walnut from the table, he crushed it with his bare hand before Eriand's face. "You silly boy. You've blundered into matters so far beyond your understanding. . . ." He studied the Prince. "Had your brother the grace to die in Krondor,

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To the guard captain he said, "Take them now, and watch the witch woman. She's from Stardock and has some sort of power to know what you're thinking if you're not careful." He glanced at her and said, "We may have to keep her. That would prove a useful talent. But if any of them causes you any difficulty, kill them."

The soldiers obeyed without hesitation and in a moment were taking the three from the apartment, making sure there was no chance of escape.

The armed men hesitated a moment, startled by Miya's unexpected alarm. Borric took no time to think;

he reacted. He threw his dirk at the first man to rise, taking him in the chest. Another went down from a vaulting lunge that cleared five feet, and three men withdrew in haste as they brought up their own weap-

sword and needed more room for it than the rapier or shortsword that Suli carried. Borric was concerned for the boy, but could not spare any attention for him.

There were three angry guardsmen trying to kill him at the moment.

Borric parried a thrust from one man with his dirk, and took another in the throat with his rapier, ducking under a thrust by the third. A solid crash behind and a scream cut off suddenly and Borric knew that Ghuda had taken out another man. Four quickly down and still no attempt to organize. Borric pressed his attack. He slashed wickedly at a man's head, taking off an ear. The man fell, crying in pain and unable to defend himself, and Borric killed him with his dirk while slashing at the remaining man.

Borric heard the solid noise of steel cleaving meat and bone and judged Ghuda had killed or disabled the fifth. The Prince parried a blow toward his own head by the last man he faced and ran him through.

come at him on his left side, and Borric leaped atop a table, sprang, and came down in time to kill the man from behind. He then struck out and wounded one of the two remaining men attacking Suli. But as that man went down, the other thrust with his longsword and the boy screamed.

Borric hacked with the edge of his blade, cutting at least three inches into the neck of the man who had wounded Suli. The man made a pitiful noise, much like a mouse's squeak, and collapsed to the floor. Then it was quiet.

Borric pulled off one dead man who lay atop Suli and knelt beside the boy, who was covered in blood and vainly attempting to hold together a gaping wound in his stomach. Borric had seen such wounds in the field before and knew Suli's life would be over in minutes.

Feeling a cold certainty unlike anything he had known before, Borric took the boy's hand. Suli's breath-

Borric gripped Suli's hand hard and said, "You were a fine servant."

"Then it will be written in the Book of Life that Suli Abul was the servant of a great man, the servant of a Prince."

Limp fingers slipped from the Prince's hand. "Yes, little beggar. You died the servant of a Prince." Borric had seen death before, but not in one so young. Impotence at being able to protect the boy overwhelmed him. For fully a minute he knelt, certain that if he could but think of something, the proper thing to do or say, somehow Suli wouldn't be dead.

Ghuda's voice said, "We can't linger. There are

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twelve corpses littering the floor. As soon as someone walks in here, there'll be hell to pay. Let's go!"

with his head and walked calmly past one pair into another dark hall. Then, halfway down the length of the dark hallway, he heard muffled voices approaching. As one, Borric and Ghuda ducked into the recesses of a doorway, just as another pair of men hurried past.

The voice of the stout man Borric had seen a few minutes earlier said, "Damn. This is starting to unravel. Awari was not supposed to hear of his sister's death this soon. Find out who sent him word and kill the "man or woman responsible. He was to be halfway to Arutha's mythical invading army when he finally found out." Borric's eyes widened. Princess Sojiana was dead! Perhaps that was what all the madness in the palace was about, not a search for four nameless vagabonds who stumbled into the palace, but a search for the Princess's murderer. Borric signaled to Ghuda to follow and they hung back a little, then darted across the intersecting hallway, getting back within earshot of the two men once more. The stout one continued his complaint. "Awari's a stiff-necked idiot. He will certainly return to

shed, near the servants' lodgings on the lower levels,"
said Toren Sie.

"Move him to one of the empty servant's quarters
and then let the guards find him. Have the Captain
report the man was found and killed resisting arrest and
let it circulate among the Gallery that he was killed to

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keep him silent. Then have the guard Captain who finds
him die mysteriously. I will denounce the plot in the
Gallery. By being the first to raise suspicion, we'll divert
it from ourselves for the time being. By the time anyone
begins to question things, it will be too late."

"But won't that exonerate Isles?"

"No," replied the stout Keshian, "but it will again
make everyone wonder who knew, who took a hand,
and how high up the conspiracy went. Every rival in the

the far end of the hall. "And where is Miya?" asked the stout man as he turned to open the door. He must have glimpsed the two figures following after, for he called, "Who is that?"

Borric walked up, out of the gloom, and saw the two men before the door. The thinner of the two said, "You!"

Borric smiled a grim smile as he leveled his sword and said, "Ghuda, I have the honor of presenting Lord Toren Sie, Ambassador of Her Majesty, the Empress of Kesh, to the Prince's court in Krondor."

The second man turned as if to bolt into the room, and Ghuda moved to cut him off. "And that," said Borric, "is one who is unknown to me, but his clothing is unmistakably that of another member of the Royal House of Kesh."

Toren Sie said, "If I shout, a dozen guards will be here

Ambassador's throat, Borric answered, "An audience with the Empress."

"Impossible."

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Borric motioned with the point of his blade, making a dramatic whooshing sound right below Toren Sie's chin "I don't know everything that is going on here," he said, "but I do know enough that should we live to reach the Empress you are most likely a dead man. If you have any hope for avoiding that fate, you had best begin by telling me what I need to know."

The stout man said, "We will tell you what you wish to know. But we can do it better inside this door. We can sit like civilized beings."

Without waiting for a response, the stout man opened the door and only Ghuda's quick reaction kept it from

the reception chamber of the complex. Ghuda was at the door when the man sprung through shouting, "Kill them!"

Borric didn't hesitate, but struck the Ambassador hard in the side of the head with the hilt of his sword. The man slumped to the floor, unconscious, as Borne sprinted toward the next door.

When he got there, he found Ghuda standing in open amazement, and the stout man dangling a foot off the ground. Around the room a full dozen guardsmen in the uniform of the Inner Legion and a few of the trueblood lay stunned on the floor. Also unconscious were Earl James, Lady Gamina, and Eriand.

Sitting atop a large round table was Nakor, grimacing strangely and making odd noises as he pointed two fingers at the floating man. Seeing Ghuda and Borric, he stopped his grunting and said, "Borric! Ghuda!" Instantly the stout Keshian fell to the floor with a harsh

"I was having fun with the guards, playing a merry game of 'catch-me,' and they got lost. So I went looking for them. I saw you, or so I thought, being led away by guards and thought to inquire how you managed to find such splendid clothing, and where you had lost my friends Ghuda and Suli. Where is Suli?"

Ghuda glanced at Borric, who said, "Suli is dead."

"That is sad," said the little man. "He was a good-hearted boy and would have been a good man. He most likely will be when next he travels the Wheel. Is this your brother?" he asked, indicating Eriand.

"Yes," said Borric. "What did you do to them?"

"Oh, I came into the room and everyone got very excited. Some of them were not very pleased to see me, and I was growing tired of the game, so I stunned everyone. I assumed you would come along, sooner or later. See? I was right."

Nakor shrugged. "It's a trick."

Borric laughed again. "What now?"

Nakor reached into his rucksack and said, "Want an orange?"

"I never thought I'd say this to you," said Eriand, "but I have missed you."

Borric nodded. "Same here. Now, what are we going to do about this mess?"

James was shaking off the effects of Nakor's stun while Gamma was still barely conscious. Ghuda stood watch over the reviving guards and looked convincingly ready to cut in half anyone who moved, so they sat quietly and gave no trouble.

Eriand had been the first to revive, something to do with being the youngest, according to Nakor. The

Empress herself . . . ?"

"How?" asked Borric.

"Gamina," answered Eriand.

Borric looked uncomprehending and Eriand said,
"She caft do mind-speech, remember?"

Borric nodded, then his face reddened. "I could have
'called' for help with my mind when I first got in the
palace and she would have heard."

"Why didn't you?" asked James as Gamina began to
rouse.

Borric's grin was sheepish. "I didn't think of it."

"And," said James, "how did you escape her mind
touch when she stumbled across you earlier today?"

don't like magicians. I just do a few tricks that make people laugh. That is all."

As Gamina fully roused, James said, "From the look of the guards and our fat friend over there, yours are no mean tricks, and not always funny."

Nakor's grin widened and he said, "Thank you. I'm pretty good at what I do, and I thought this was pretty funny."

Gamina caught sight of Borric and said, "You're alive!"

"Apparently," answered Borric with a laugh.

Gamina gave him a hug and said, "How, then, couldn't I find you in the desert?"

Borric's look showed he didn't understand, then comprehension registered. "Of course. That bloody robe I

Tames said, "Perhaps. In any event, the next question is- how do we get from here to the Empress?"

"It should be easy," said Nakor. "You just follow me. And bring these fellows along."

Ghuda had disarmed the twelve guards and dragged the stunned Toren Sie into the room. With four armed guards, Borric, Eriand, James, and Ghuda, the fourteen captives didn't seem inclined to start any trouble.

Nirome warned, "As soon as we see another company of guards, you'll be prisoners. Men loyal to Awari control this entire sector of the palace."

Nakor grinned. "Maybe."

When they reached the occupied hallway, where they would begin to pass dozens of guards, Nakor reached into his rucksack and pulled something out of it. Borric and Ghuda were almost blase about the sack at

the haU.

The guards they passed simply gaped at the splendid bird. Nakor said to each sentry he passed, "Please, come with us. We go to see the Empress."

No matter what Nirome or Toren Sie said, the guards seemed mesmerized by the sight of the falcon. They joined in behind the Islemen and their captive band and soon a procession of two hundred guards followed Nakor and his companions as they entered the hall of the Empress.

The Master of Ceremonies said, "What is this?"

Borric and Eriand both came forward and Eriand said, "The Princes Borric and Eriand of Isles wish an immediate audience with Her Majesty. We wish to discuss a small matter of treason."

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Borric stood beside his brother. "You—unless I'm sadly mistaken—are supposed to be dead."

Nirome attempted to speak, "Majesty, these criminals—"

Ghuda rested his blade on the stout man's shoulder, saying, "It's not polite to speak until you're given permission." To the Empress he said, "Sorry, mum. Continue if you please."

Lakeisha seemed to sense some mysteries were about to be unraveled and chose not to take offense. "Thank you," she said drily. To Nakor she said, "Let's begin with you, little man. You know that to possess the royal falcon is a sentence of death."

Nakor grinned. "Yes, Empress. But I do not possess this bird. I am merely providing the falcon transport to your august self. I'm just bringing you a birthday present." Without waiting for permission, the audacious lit-

"Nakor understand, Empress. This one is a boy. He will father many falcon hatchlings for you. I caught him last spring in the mountains west of Tao Zi. There are a few more up there, too. If you send your Imperial falconer, he can bring them to the mews. The line will be revived."

Since the death of her daughter, the Empress had not smiled. Now she smiled. Something in the little man's words touched her, and she knew he was speaking not

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only of the rare birds, but of the Royal House as well.
"This is a gift of stunning splendor."

Stopping next to the throne before descending the steps to the floor below, Nakor leaned down and said, "It would be a very wise thing if you were to believe the twin boys, for those two over there"—he indicated

separate accounts, attempting to make sense of all that had transpired since the desert raid. They spoke without interruption for nearly a quarter-hour. As Eriand concluded his account of the events leading up to their arrival in the chamber, he said, "And the last thing that convinced me Nirome was responsible for Sojiana's death was his crushing a nut with his bare hand. Sojiana's neck was broken—only someone with powerful hands could accomplish the feat. Locklear is a master swordsman, but he lacked the strength." Pointing at Nirome, he said, "There is the murderer. There is the mysterious Lord Fire!"

The Empress rose and said, "My lord Nirome—"

But from the door came a cry, "Mother!"

Prince Awari entered, with a dozen officers of the army at his back, including Lords Ravi and Jaka. Coming to stand before the throne, he bowed, then said, "What is this terrible news about Sojiana?"

The Empress studied her son's face a moment, then

title most. Especially now."

"Most Majestic Ruler, have mercy. I did but what I

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thought was best for the Empire, which was to bring your son to primacy. But it was never my wish to see anyone harmed. The attempts upon Prince Borric were but a ruse, to keep the Islemen from reaching the cib,. We only wished to keep Sojiana's followers' attention 10 the north—which is why we falsified the reports of Isles' gathering to invade. But the murder of your daughter was none of my doing! It was Awari who sought to remove his rival."

Prince Awari went livid at that point and had his sword halfway out of its sheath before Lord Jaka put a restraining hand upon him. The Empress shouted, "Enough!" Glancing around the room, she said, "Is there any path to truth in this?" To the twins she said, "Your arguments are convincing, but where is the

Gamina seemed about to respond, but the Empress said, "I doubt you would lie, my dear." She gestured around her, indicating the now full gallery above her. "But I doubt others here would be so kindly disposed to believe you. If it's not come to your notice, this is a rather tense situation."

A guard Captain in the armor of the Inner Legion hurried into the room and whispered into the ear of the Master of Ceremonies. He, in turn, made a gesture requesting permission to approach the Empress. She gave permission and he hurried up the dais.

When he was finished passing on the Captain's report, the Empress sat back. "Well, then, there you have it. We have reports now that two companies of the Household Guard are barricaded in one wing of the palace, in open defiance of orders to put down their arms, and throughout the city armed companies of men are moving.

sword first, or whose retainer draws sword first, that man be he base born or most noble lord, is under death sentence. Do I make myself clear?" The last was directed at Lord Ravi, who stood motionless.

The Empress sat again and said, "Again I am faced with betrayal and disloyalty, but have no means of discerning the truth."

Nakor cleared his throat pointedly.

"Yes?" said Lakeisha. "What is it?"

"Empress, there is an ancient Isalani means of determining the truth of a thing."

"I would be pleased to know what it is."

Grinning, Nakor said to Ghuda, "Bring the fat lord out here, before the dais." As the mercenary did so, Nakor put his rucksack on the ground and began rum-

throat were the green of the darkest and most vivid emerald. Eyes like fire opals, blue-black with red flame dancing in them regarded the crowd, which muttered with astonishment. A blood-red tongue flicked in and out of its mouth. Then it opened its mouth with a loud and ominous hiss, revealing two terrible-looking fangs of ivory. It writhed and hissed again as Nakor set it down on the floor in front of Nirome. The courtier shrank back against the steps of the dais as Nakor said, "This is the Truth Snake of Sha-shu. To lie before him is to embrace death." With a cheery note to Nirome, he added, "It's very painful."

The serpent slithered to Nirome's feet then raised itself up, so that it appeared to look the stout trueblood lord in the eyes. The broad hood flared out and silver sparkles danced on its golden back.

Nakor said, "The snake will not strike so long as you

Several members of the Gallery spoke in hushed whispers. The Empress said, "What was Awari's part in this?"

His fear turning to anger, Nirome turned to face his Empress. "Awari! A strutting peacock and a fool. He thought I was but seeking to bolster his claim. I was going to place blame upon Awari for Sojiana's death, or at least cast enough suspicion that no one would accept him as heir to the throne."

"So," said the Empress sitting back in her throne, "you would put Sharana in my place. But why?"

Nirome said, "Because Ravi and his allies would never accept another Empress. The southern nations are ready to rebel once more and with the Brothers of the Horse holding the pass through the Girdle of Kesh, Lesser Kesh would be lost for all times. And Lord Jcika and the other truebloods would never accept a non-

The Empress covered her face with her hands, and for a moment it appeared as if she might be weeping. When she at last removed her hands, her eyes were indeed red-rimmed, but no sign of tears could be seen. "How have we come to this, that our best plot for their own aggrandizement, and not for the well-being of the Empire." She sighed loudly and said, "My lord Rau, would this plan have worked?"

The Master of the Brothers of the Horse bowed. "Mistress, I fear the traitor was correct. Until this evening, we believed the Prince, your son, to have been the one

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responsible for Sojjiana's death. We would not have accepted Sharana as our mistress, but we would not have allowed one who has spilled royal blood to command us. Nirome would have been the logical compromise."

Lakeisha said, "You have been as wronged as any here, it seems. Prince Eriand. What is your wish?"

"A question of Nirome." To the trembling lord he said, "Locklear has been branded with the murder of Sojiana. I told you that only a man with powerful arms and hands could have broken her neck in such a fashion. Did you kill her and cast the blame upon my friend?"

Nirome gazed at the hovering serpent and barely whispered, "Yes."

James said, "Where is Locklear?"

Attempting to sink even farther back into the stone steps, Nirome said, "He is dead. His body is hidden in a grain room in the lower levels."

Gamina's eyes began to brim with tears and James and the twins all looked stricken at the news. They had known against all hope that Locklear was most likely

Rising, the Empress turned to look at the assembled Gallery. "Hear my judgment!" Pointing at Nirome, she said, "This man, by his own words, has condemned himself." Turning to stare at the traitor, she said, "Nirome, lord no longer, by your own words you have confessed your evil and for this you shall die."

The stout man stiffened and said, "I demand my right to die at my own hands!"

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"You shall demand nothing!" spat the Empress. "You are not of the blood from this moment forward. There will be no sweet death as you drift into intoxicated oblivion from a gentle poison, no lightly cut wrists in a hot bath as you drift away into eternal sleep.

"In ancient times a punishment was decreed for those who betrayed their kings and queens. It has not been pronounced in centuries, but it shall be now.

place in the Eternal Hunt. Then you shall be taken to the base of the plateau and stripped naked. Then shall a dozen guards of the trueblood whip you and run you through the city. Should you fall, they shall apply hot coals to your buttocks, until you rise and run again. At the gates of the city you will be hung in a cage, and your sentence will be read aloud by guards upon the hour, so that all passing may hear of your crimes. Even the lowest shall be offered sticks of bamboo with which to torment you, so you may feel the wrath of those you betrayed, yet you shall endure and no one shall grant you merciful death. When you are near unto death from exposure, you shall be taken from the cage and revived with water made bitter with vinegar and bread covered with salt. You shall be driven by lash and hot coals to the edge of the Overn Deep, to the marshes where the first Kings of the trueblood hunted. There you shall be made to drink the bitter wine of betrayal and eat the rotten meat of treason. Then shall your manhood be cut from your body. You shall then be bound and thrown into the marsh, where the crocodiles of the Overn shall devour

who betrayed his nation,' and the name Nirome will be forbidden to children of the trueblood from this day forward. In time, even the gods will not know who you were. And in the black void of the nameless and forgotten will your soul endure eternal confinement, alone.

"This, then, is my decree!"

The Master of Ceremonies called out, "She Who Is Kesh has spoken! Now, let it be done!"

Guards hurried forward and hesitated as they reached the cobra. Nakor motioned that the snake wouldn't touch them, and the guards seized the terrified Nirome. "No!" he screamed as they dragged him from the court, and his cries echoed through the halls.

The Empress said to Toren Sie, "You, my onetime friend, shall name every accomplice in this plot and perhaps I shall be kind to you: a quick death or perhaps even mere banishment. Otherwise you shall follow your

The grinning wizard hurried over and said, "This, Empress?" He reached down and grabbed the cobra around the middle, and when he stood, there was only a long strand of cord in his hands. "This is just a piece of rope."

He coiled the line and put it back in his rucksack. Eriand's eyes were wide, but Borric said, "It's only a trick."

Chapter Eighteen

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The servant bowed.

Borric, Eriand, and their companions entered a small garden, and the servant bade them sit upon soft cushions surrounding a wondrous table, with all manner of delicacies and a choice of fine wines. A cold pitei of lager and a warm pitcher of ale were the choices of Ghuda and Nakor respectively, and the guests began

used to carry it.

Sharana entered a moment later, and came to sit between her grandmother and Eriand. She smiled at Borric, who looked her over with open and frank appraisal. Borric now wore his own clothing, from among those bags not stolen by the raiders in the desert. His hair was its own natural color, the dye having been washed out with some foul-smelling lotion that Nakor provided. Ghuda and the little wizard wore fine robes provided for the occasion by the Empress's staff.

"I wanted a little informal chat before we return to this miserable business of the Jubilee. I can't believe we'll have to endure another four-and-a-half weeks of it."

Eriand said, "I was somewhat surprised that you ordered it continued, Majesty."

The old woman smiled. "Nirome's plotting would be

look of a common enough fellow, Ghuda Bule. Isn't that

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Ghuda, uncomfortable at being this close to such powerful and important people, said, "This is true, Majesty. Most men won't give you much trouble if they get food to eat, a roof over their head, a good woman now and again, and some fun along the way. Too much bother, otherwise."

The Empress laughed. "A philosopher. And a serious one." To the others she said, "Didn't even notice I was having fun with him." She sighed. "I think I may have lost the knack of fun."

Looking at Ghuda, she said, "So then, what is your reward to be for helping save our Empire?"

Now Ghuda looked terribly embarrassed, and Borric said, "He was promised ten thousand golden ecu, by

such an offer, but he said, "I am sorry. Your Majesty, but I think I'm going to take the money and open an inn, in Jandowae maybe. The weather's nice there, and there's not much trouble. I'll get a couple of pretty serving girls and maybe even marry one of them and have some sons. I'm getting too old for travel and adventure."

The Empress smiled warmly and said, "I envy you your modest ambitions, warrior. You'll do well telling your stories around the taproom in the evening. But you have my debt and should you ever need an ear at court, send word and I'll listen."

Ghuda inclined his head and said, "Your Majesty."
^ "What about you, little man?" she said to Nakor.
"What can we do to thank you for your part in this?"

The Isalani wiped foam from his mouth with the back of his sleeve and said, "Could I have a horse? A large

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press. It's difficult to ride more than one at a time. But one beautiful black horse and a grand blue robe would once again make me Nakor the Blue Rider. That would be a fine thing."

"Anything else? Gold? A court appointment?"

Reaching into his rucksack, Nakor pulled out a deck of playing cards. Piffing them, he said, "As long as I have my cards, I don't need gold. And if I take an appointment at court, I won't have time to ride my black horse. Thank you. Empress, but no."

The Empress regarded the two men and said, "The two most refreshingly original characters to walk into the palace in my life and I can't keep either of you around. Very well," she said, with a hint of humor. "But if I were Sharana's age still, I'd find a way to keep you here."

Everyone laughed at that. The Empress said, "Lord

James said, "I think Prince Arutha and the King will both understand." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "We knew coming down here there would be risks. It's the price we pay for our privileges."

The Empress regarded him with a penetrating look "You Islemen are a strange lot. You take very seriously your concept of the obligations of the nobility and the Great Freedom."

James shrugged. "The Great Freedom gives even t"e most lowborn rights the nobles cannot abridge. E^>-n the King is not above the law."

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"Brrr," said the Empress with a mock shiver. "That gives me a chill. The idea of not being able to command what I wish is ... alien."

Eriand said, "What is to happen now? I mean with you and your son?"

The Empress said, "Awari has always been a strong-headed boy. That's the reason he is not the man to guide Kesh when I am dead."

James looked at Sharana. "So the Princess will be named your heir?"

"No," said the Empress. "As much as I love her, Sharana does not have the temper to govern. Perhaps if I lived another twenty years, she might learn enough, but I doubt I'll survive half that." Sharana began to protest that she would, and the Empress waved her off. "Enough. I'm seventy-five years old and I'm tired. You have no idea what tired can be until you've had the weight of over five million people on your shoulders every day for forty-seven years. I took the throne when I was younger than your mother, may the gods give her peace. Twenty-eight years when my mother's weak

that be a fine mess." She laughed, but Eriand's face showed he didn't think the subject was comic.

Seeing Eriand's distress, Lakeisha said, "Girl, take him away and talk to him. You're going to be spending some more weeks together and you need have an understanding. Get along."

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Sharana and Eriand rose and departed, and the Empress said, "Sharana can't marry anyone but a trueblood, or we'd have a revolution here upon the plateau, and Awari would be our next Emperor. We'll barely have enough support as it is."

James considered what he knew of the court, then said, "So you're going to marry her to Diigai?"

The Empress's eyes went round in obvious pleasure "Oh, you are a clever one. I do wish I could keep you

James couldn't tell if she was joking. "Yes," she continued. "I'm going to marry her to Lord Jaka's eldest No trueblood, save Awari and perhaps a handful of his most ardent followers, will object to Diigai being the next to sit upon the Throne of Light. And with his father's sage council, he will grow to rule wisely."

Looking off to where Eriand and Sharana had disappeared, the Empress said, "All ends well, I think." To Borric she said, "I know that when you become ruler in Isles, you'll have at your side a brother who will always remember this court with some affection. And in Diigdi, Kesh will have a ruler who will feel obligation to your house." Borric inclined his head in acknowledgment James had told him of Diigai and the lion and Eriand's part in that.

Borric said, "I hope, that as long as I rule in Isles, Kesh will count us her friendly neighbor to the north."

Tapping her fingers upon the arm of her sedan chair,

court. There was never a more vigorous servant and

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brilliant mind in Kesh's employ than your late Ambassador Hazara-Khan, and the man who has been our guide lately. Lord Abu Harez, puts me much in mind of him. To limit such a man from serving you because of his ancestry . . . seems a waste."

The Empress said, "It may be you're right. But there are limits, my lord. Old ways die hard and there are men in my service, blood kin, who would die rather than see such changes. And our position is not, at this moment, what I would call the best. I have no idea how much my son was in league with Nirome, but if he truly was ignorant of what Nirome was apparently doing on his behalf, it was because he chose to be blind, deaf, and mute.

All fell silent around the table; each hoped that would be the case.

Eriand held the girl's hand tightly as he said, "What does your grandmother mean, 'need have an understanding'?"

Sharana said, "She knows how much I enjoy having you in bed with me. But I need to spend less time with you in public."

"Why?"

"I'm going to wed Lord Jaka's son, Diigai. Grandmother's decided that. The rebellious lords will get their male ruler and the trueblood will get their trueblood Emperor. He's a cousin, you know, so it's still in the family."

Eriand looked away for a moment. "I knew it was

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sionately. "I am very fond of you, Eriand. It will be good to know you are so close to the throne of Isles when I sit at the Emperor's side."

Eriand felt disappointed his statement hadn't provoked a more enthusiastic response. "I said I love you."

"Yes," said Sharana, with wide eyes fixed upon him. "\ heard you."

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Of course it does. It's very nice. I just said so. Vi hat else did you have in mind?"

"Nice?" Eriand turned around from her for a moment, feeling icy pains in his stomach. "Nothing, I guess."

Sharana said, "You say 'woman I love' as if you will not love anyone else again."

"That's the way I feel."

"That's a silly way to feel, Eriand." The girl took his hand and put it upon her breast. "Feel my heart. Can you feel the beat?"

He nodded, feeling heat rise in his body at the softness of her under his hand. "I have much room in there for many people. I love my grandmother, and my mother and father when they lived. I even love my uncle, though he is a strange man at times. I've loved other boys before you and I will love others as well, Loving one takes nothing away from the others. Can you see?"

Eriand shook his head. "I guess our ways are too different. You're going to marry another, yet you talk of

Anyway, I won't cause any difficulty with you and Dii-

She looked puzzled. "Difficulty? I don't know what you mean. I shall have to spend a few nights with him, so he gets used to the idea of being husband to the Empress's granddaughter. And if he is to be named heir I must spend most of my public time with him. But I will have most of my nights for you while you're with us. If you still wish to come to me."

Eriand felt more conflict than he could remember ever having. Then he laughed and said, "I don't know. But I think I would have trouble staying away."

Moving sensuously under his hand, she rubbed against him and gripped him tightly to her. "I thought you might." She kissed him and said, "Tell me, are you and your brother very much alike?"

At the city gates of Kesh the mounted escorts were ready. Borric, Eriand, and their party rode down the last boulevard to the edge of the town. Near the city gate, the metal cage that had held Nirome swung empty, a grim reminder of the fate of traitors. The former trueblood noble had hung there for almost two days, enduring the taunts and prodding of anyone who passed by and chose to stop and add to his torment. And there were many who relished the idea of seeing a trueblood noble brought low.

Nearly a thousand people had lined the streets as he had been taken from the cage, forced to eat salted bread and drink vinegar mixed with water, then was whipped like a beast out to the marshes on the edge of the great Overn Deep. There he was mutilated and cast to the crocodiles, while hundreds of citizens cheered. Eriand and Borric had declined the invitation to watch the spectacle. Prince Awari had watched, and no one was certain if it was to witness justice or to hear if

short kilt and golden torque of her rank, and waited formally next to her future husband. Behind, ranks of Keshian nobles waited to bid farewell to their royal guests.

Lord Jaka came forward and reined in his chariot next to his son's. Eriand halted and said, "Good day, my lords. Prince and Princess."

Sharana smiled warmly at Eriand. "Good day. Your Highness."

Borric said, "We are pleased you felt moved to come see us upon our way."

Diigai said, "Your Highness, we are much in your debt. If we can ever repay you, you have but to ask."

Borric bowed. "You are gracious. Highness. We hope the friendship we have begun here shall endure."

Eriand's eyes narrowed as he turned to look at his brother. "What—"

Borric said, "Good-bye, dear friends," and spurred his horse forward. Instantly the dozen Krondorian Palace Guards moved out and Eriand was left sitting behind.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Eriand, spurring his horse on after his brother's. "I want to talk to you!"

As the company moved out, James turned and found Nakor moving up to ride beside him. As they left the city gate and entered the road to Khattara, James said, "Nakor, you're coming with us?"

The little man smiled. "For a while. I fear things will become dull in Kesh when Borric and his brother leave. Already Ghuda is bound for Jandowae and the inn he will build. It is lonely when you don't know people."

"Maybe. But I think that someone is someone other than Nakor the Blue Rider."

James laughed. "Why don't you come with us until Stardock, spend a little time there, and decide later."

"Maybe. But I don't think I'm going to like it."

James thought for a while, and became certain of something. "Do you know of Pug the Magician?"

"Pug is famous. He is a very powerful magician. He works arts like none since Macros the Black. I am a very poor man who knows some simple tricks. See, I would not like it there."

James smiled. "He said something. He said that if I ever needed speak for him, on his behalf, then I should say this thing."

is why he had me remember these words: there is no magic."

Nakor laughed. He seemed genuinely amused. "Pug the Magician said that?"

"Yes."

"Then," said Nakor, "he is a very smart man for a magician."

"You'll go to Stardock?"

Nakor nodded. "Yes. I think you are right. Pug wanted me to go there and knew you would need to tell me this thing to make me go."

Gamina had been riding silently beside her husband and at last she said, "Father often knew things before others. I think he knew that if left to their own devices,

"What?"

"Tell me what 'there is no magic' means."

Nakor's face screwed up in concentration. "Stop," he said. James, Gamina, and Nakor moved their horses out of line and halted by the roadside, just beyond the boundary of the city. Nakor reached into his rucksack and pulled out three oranges. "Can you juggle?"

"A little," said James.

Nakor tossed the three oranges to him. "Juggle."

James, who had always had dexterity bordering on the supernatural, caught the three oranges and propelled them upward, and quickly was juggling them while holding his horse steady: no mean feat. Then Nakor said, "Can you do it with your eyes closed?"

ground. "What?"

"I said you were to juggle with one hand."

"Why?"

"It's a trick. Do you see?"

James said, "I'm not sure."

"Juggling is a trick. It is not magic. But if you don't know how to do it, it looks like magic. That is why people toss coins to jugglers at the fair. When you can do it with one hand, you're learning something." Then he spurred his horse on and said, "And when you can do it without using your hands, you'll understand what Pug meant."

Arutha and Anita stood before their thrones as their sons marched into the court in Krondor. In the four months since the boys had left their court, the Prince

The twins came to stand before their parents and both bowed formally. Arutha couldn't put his finger on it but something in them was different. He had sent boys south to deal with Kesh and young men had returned. They were now confident where they had been brash, decisive where they had been impulsive, and in their eyes was an echo of loss, of seeing the results of vicious and hateful acts. Arutha had read the reports that hard-riding dispatch riders had carried ahead of the returning Princes, but now he understood them.

So that all could hear, he said, "It pleases us that our sons have returned. The Princess and I welcome them back to our court."

Then he stepped down from the dais and embraced Borric, then Eriand. Anita came behind and hugged both fiercely, lingering a bit when she held Borric's cheek next to her own. Then Elena and Nicholas were there to greet them, and Borric held his sister close to him, saying, "After those Keshian noblewomen, you are

laugh. Borric said, "I don't think you'll be starting any fashions here, little sister. Keshian ladies wear almost no clothing at all. While Eriand and I found it very attractive, I think Father would take one look at you in Keshian court regalia and have you locked away in your room forever."

Elena blushed. "Well, tell me everything anyway. We're going to have a wedding celebration for Baron James and I'll want something different."

Nicholas had been quietly waiting next to his father, and Borne and Eriand as one noticed him. "Hello, little brother," said Borric. He bent down hands on knees so

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he could look Nicholas in the eyes. "Have you been well?"

Nicholas threw his arms around Borric's neck and

After a moment, Borric picked up the boy and said
"That's enough, Nicky. We're both just fine."

Eriand said, "Yes, we are. And we missed you."

Nicholas wiped away his tears and said, "You did?"

"Yes, we did," answered Borric. "I met a boy in Kesh
who was only a few years older than you. He made me
understand just how much I did miss my little brother."

Nicholas said, "What's his name?"

"His name was Suli Abul," said Borric with a tear
running down his face.

"That's a strange name," said Nicholas. "What hap-
pened to him?"

"I'll tell you about him."

Nicholas nodded his head emphatically, and Eriand tousled his hair.

Arutha motioned for James to come away from the others and then when they were off a little way, Duke Gardan joined them.

Arutha said, "First of all, I'll want to talk to you at length tomorrow. But from your reports, I think we owe you thanks."

James said, "It was something that needed to be done •• Really, the boys deserve most of the credit. If Borric had returned to Krondor rather than risk his life trying to catch up with us, or had Eriand not been so quick to see

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through some very clever ruses . . . who knows what harm could have come of it?"

the right hand of power?"

James glanced at the happy faces in the court and said, "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

Arutha said, "Good. Because I have something to tell you. Gardan is finally retiring."

James's eyes widened. "Then . . ."

"No," said Arutha. "I'm offering the post of Duke of Krondor to Earl Geoffery of Ravenswood, who's serving in Rillanon with Lyam's First Advisor."

James's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying, Arutha?"

The Prince smiled his crooked smile and James felt his stomach turn cold. "When the festivities of your wedding celebration are over, my dear Jimmy," said Arutha, "you and your lady are bound for Rillanon. You

said, "Amos Trask is right about you, you know. You do take the fun out of life."