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permission of the publishers.

To jon and Anita Everson,
who were with me from the start.

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Acknowledgments

as is ALwAys the case, I am indebted to many people for the creation
of

And for all of those out there who send me letters of praise or complaint,
who let me know someone out there is reading the work. Time does not permit me to answer most of them, but they all get read. And to Sean Tate, who thought up the character of Malar.

Character List

AcAmA-leader of the eldar, in the Elf Queen's court
ADELiN-elf in Elvandar
AGLARANNA-Elf Queen in Elvandar, wife of Tomas, mother of Calin and Calis
AKEE-Hadati hillman
AKiER-Licutenant on Royal Bulldog
ALETA-young desciple in Temple of Arch-Indar
ASHAm iBiN AL-TuK-Keshian General
AVERY, RUPERT "Roo"-merchant of Kronдор
AVERY, KARLi-wife of Roo

BOYSE-Captain of Duko's forces
B~-Duke of Silden

CALHERN, THOmAs-acting Lieutenant of Palace Guard
CALiN-elf heir to the throne of Elvandar, half-brother to Calis, son of Aglaranna and King Aidan
CALis-"The Eagle of Kronдор," special agent of the Prince of Kronдор, Duke of the Court, son of Aglaranna and Tomas, half brother to Calin
CHALmEs-ruling magician at Stardock
CHAPAc-twin brother of Tilac, son of EWa

ERLAND-brother to the King and uncle to Prince Patrick

FADAWAH-former general commanding the Emerald Queen's Army,
self-styled "King of the Bitter Sea"

FRANCINE "FRANCIE "-daughter of the Duke of Silden

GREYLOCK, OWEN-Knight-Marshal of the Prince's Army

HAMMOND-Lieutenant in King's Army

HERBERT OF RUTHERWOOD-scribe in Port Vykor

JACOBY, HELEN-widow of Randolph Jacoby, mother of Natally and
Willem

JALLOM-Captain of Duko's army

JAMISON, JAMES "Jimmy"-elder son of Arutha, grandson of James

JAMESON, DASHEL "DASH" -younger son of Arutha, grandson of James

KAHIL-Fadawah's intelligence chief

KALEID-ruling magician at Stardock

LELAND-son of Richard of Mukerlic

Livia-daughter of Lord Vasarius

MACKEY-Sergeant of Palace Guard

MATAK-old soldier in Duko's command

MILo-owner of the Inn of the Pintail in Ravensburg, father of Rosalyn

MIR~A-magician and ally of Calis and Pug

NAKOR THE ISALANI-gambler, magic-user, friend of Pug

NmwiNi-Captain of captured Quegan ship

NORDAN-General in Fadawah's army

ERIK-RIE's daughter, wife of Rudolph, mother of Gerd

RUDOLPH-baker in Ravensburg, husband of Rosalyn, stepfather to Gerd

RUNCOR-Captain of Duko's army

RYANA-dragon shape-changer, friend of Tomas and Pug

SHATI, JADow-Lieutenant in Erik's company

SHO Pi-former companion of Erik and Roo, student of Nakor

SONGTI-Captain of Duko's army

STYLEs-Captain of Royal Bulldog

SUBAi-captain

of the Royal Krondorian Pathfinders

TALWIN-spy for Arutha

TILAC-twin brother of Chapac, son of Ellia

T~R, GUSTAF-prisoner with Dash, later Constable

TOMAS-Warleader of Elvandar, husband of Aglaranna, father of Calis,

inheritor of the powers of Ashen-Shugar

TRMA-female thief, Daymaster of the Mockers

TUPPIN, JOHN-thief with lumpy face, leader of Krondor's "bashers"

VASARIUS-Quegan noble and merchant

VON DARKMOOR, MATHILDA-BaroneSS

of Darkmoor, grandmother to

Gerd

VON DArkmoOR, GERD-Baron of Darkmoor, son of Rosalyn and Stefan

von Darkmoor, nephew to Erik

VON DARKMOOR, ERIK-Captain of the Crimson Eagles

WINDELL-Captain in Krondor

THE GENERAL KNOCKED.

"Enter," said the self-styled King of the Bitter Sea as he looked up from a hastily scribbled note just handed him by his Captain of Intelligence, Kahil.

General Nordan entered and shook off the snow from his cloak. "You found us a cold land to rule, Majesty," he said with a smile. He gave Kahil the briefest nod of greeting.

Fadawah, former Commanding General of the Army of the Emerald Queen, now ruler of the City of Ylith and the surrounding countryside, said, "At least it's a cold land with food and firewood." He waved in a vague fashion to the south. "We're still getting stragglers in from as far

away as Darkmoor who paint a bleak picture about conditions throughout the Western Realm."

Nordan motioned to a chair and Fadawah nodded. while old companions, they observed the formalities, as Fadawah prepared to launch his spring campaign. The General still wore the ritual scars on his cheeks, marks given him when swearing loyalty to the Pantathians. He had considered attempting to find a witch or healing priest who could remove them, for when he had finally realized that the Pantathians were as much dupes as he was, he had killed their remaining high priest. As far as Fadawah was concerned, he was no longer bound to anyone. He was his own man, and he was in a rich land with an army. But Kahil had reminded

Quester's

View, north to the outskirts of Zun, west to the city of Natal, which was

now occupied by more of his own men than their own pitiful defenses.

He had also captured Hawk's Hollow, a small town, but one giving him control of a vital pass through the mountains to the east.

"Some of the men don't like the idea of staying," said Nordan. The stocky soldier rubbed his bearded chin, and cleared his throat.

"They're talking of finding a ship and going back across the sea."

"To what?" asked Fadawah. "To a land burned out and overrun by barbarians from the grasslands? Besides the dwarven stronghold in the Ratn'gari Mountains and some surviving Jehsandi in the North, what is there left of civilization? Did we leave a city standing. Is there anything

there to support us?" Fadawah scratched his head. He wore a single long

fall of hair and shaved the rest of his head, another sign of his devotion

to the Emerald Queen's dark powers. "Tell any of the men who are talking

this way that come spring, if they can find a ship and take it, they're free

to leave." He looked off into space, as if seeing something in the air. "I

want no one here who isn't ready to serve me. We're going to have a serious fight on our hands."

"The Kingdom?"

Fadawah said, "You don't think they're going to sit idly by and not attempt to regain their lands, do you?"

"No, but they were terribly mauled at Krondor and Darkmoor. The prisoners tell us they don't have much of an army left to put in the field."

the
estate house of the Earl of Hlth, and by all reports along with
Duke of Yabon and the Earl of LaMut. "If our information is right, we
face a boy up in LaMut." He rubbed his chin. "We need to take LaMut
as soon as the spring thaw begins, and I want Yabon in our grasp by
midsummer. " He smiled. "Send a message to the leader in Natal . . .
" He

turned to Kahil. "What's his title?"

"The First Councilor," supplied his Captain of Intelligence.

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"Send the First Councilor our thanks for his hospitality in providing
billets for our men this winter, and send him some gold. A thousand
pieces
should do."

"A thousand?" asked Nordan.

"We have it. And we'll get more. Then withdraw our men and bring
them here." He looked at his old friend. "That will at least keep the
First

Councilor on our good side until we return to Natal, take and keep
it."

He pointed to the map. "I want Duko and his men down in Krondor
by then."

Nordan raised an eyebrow in curiosity.'

Fadawah said, "Duko makes me uneasy. He's an ambitious man."

He frowned. "It was only chance that put you and me first and second
on the Pantathian's roles, else we could be taking orders from Duko."

Nordan nodded. "But he's a good leader, and he's always obeyed
without question."

Krondor and move back toward the old battle line. What's that place?"

"Nightmare Ridge."

"Well named." Fadawah sighed. "I'm not a greedy man. Being King of the Bitter Sea is enough. We'll let the Kingdom of the Isles keep their

Darkmoor and the lands to the east." Then he smiled. "For now."

"But first we must retake Krondor."

Fadawah said, "No, first we must make them think Krondor.

we want to retake

These Kingdom nobles are not stupid, they are not self-consumed like those of our homeland." He remembered how shocked the

Priest-King of Lananda had been when Fadawah and his army had refused to heed his order to leave his city. "These are smart men, duty-bound men; they will come at us, and they will come hard. We must expect that.

"No, let them think Krondor is the prize, and when they realize we are firm in Yabon, perhaps they will negotiate, or perhaps not, but either

way, once we have control of Yabon, we are here for good. Let Duko get

punished lest he become ambitious."

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Nordan stood. "If you permit, I'll tell the men those who wish to leave in the spring may."

Fadawah waved his permission.

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Far assign in passing Nordan down in Saren.

Fadawah said, "Design?"

Kahil leaned over, putting his arm around Fadawah's shoulder, and he whispered, "Put all your disloyal commanders to the south, to insure

that when the enemy exacts their price for our conquest, those we can most afford to lose pay it."

Fadawah's eyes became unfocused, as if he was listening to something in the distance. "Yes, that is wise."

Kahil said, "You need to surround yourself with those who can be trusted, those who are loyal beyond a doubt. You need to return the Immortals to a place of prominence."

"No!" said Fadawah. "Those madmen served dark powers--"

Kahil interrupted. "Not dark powers, Majesty, but vast powers. Powers that can insure your rule not only in Yabon, but in Krondor, too."

"Krondor?" asked Fadawah.

Kahil clapped his hands twice, and the door swung open. Two warriors, each with ritual scars on his cheeks that matched Fadawah's, entered, and Kahil said, "Guard the King with your lives."

Fadawah repeated, "Krondor."

Kahil rose and departed, closing the door behind him. A faint smile passed across his face before he turned and left upon his next task, following

Nordan and marking those men for death who displayed even the smallest hint of disloyalty.

Fadawah looked at the two soldiers and motioned for them to stand away from him. The scars on their faces reminded him of the dark and distant time he was caught up in the magic of the Emerald Queen and the lost months when the demon had ruled her army. He hated feeling used and would kill anyone who again attempted to use him as the

Emerald Queen had.

He moved to the map on the wall and began to plan his spring campaign.

city, then into deep mud stained wagons carrying needed supplies. Now it was icy again, but at least Dash was thankful there was currently no snow. The sky was clear, the late afternoon-sun hinting at warmth that wasn't really there. Dash knew it was his mood as much as the weather, but this particular winter seemed to have lasted longer than any in his young life.

The sounds of the city carried through the still, icy air as the day wound down. With luck the new gate would be finished before sunset, and an extra modicum of security would be added to the sum of things that needed to be done yesterday. Dash was tired, fatigued beyond anything he could remember in his twenty years of life. Part of it was from the seemingly endless list of things that needed attention, and the rest was from worry; his brother Jimmy was overdue.

Jimmy was acting the part of exploring officer, a scout behind enemy lines. Prince Patrick of Krondor had decided to move hard and fast against a threat of Keshian expansion into the southern flank of the Kingdom in the spring. That meant that the retaking of lands lost during the invasion the previous summer would be left to Owen Greylock, Knight-Marshal of Krondor, and Erik von Darkmoor, Knight-Captain of the Crimson Eagles, an elite mobile force of handpicked men.

Which had meant the Prince needed information on what the invaders were doing between Darkmoor and Krondor. And Jimmy had volunteered to go see what was going on. He was now three days overdue. Dash had come to the edge of the patrolled area, a series of burned-out walls that marked the western edge of the foubourgh of DI~oor.

brush.
Sound carried for miles in the winter cold.
Then Dash heard something. A faint sound, coming from far away.
It wasn't the sound of hooves striking hard dirt and rock Dash had
hoped
to hear. Rather it was the rolling crunch of ice underfoot. And
whoever
made the sound was coming toward him with a methodical step, even
and unhurried.
Dash flexed his gloved fingers and slowly pulled his sword from his
scabbard. If the previous conflict had taught him nothing else, it
was to
always be ready. There were no safe positions outside the fortress
that
was the city of Darkmoor.
In the distance he detected motion, and he focused on it. A single
figure
trudged along the road. He was moving at a plodding walk, and as Dash
watched, he hurried to a slow trot. Dash knew he was walking one
hundred
paces, then trotting one hundred paces, a practice drilled into Dash
and his brother by their arms teachers as boys. For a man without a
mount
it could cover almost as much distance as a horse could in a day,
more
over the course of weeks.
Dash watched. The figure resolved itself into a man wrapped in a
heavy grey cloak; clothing designed to make it difficult to see the
wearer
from any distance in the gloom of winter. Only on the bright days
when
the sky was clear would the wearer be easy to spot.
As the man on foot came closer, Dash saw he was without a hat, but

Jimmy, Dash's brother, hiked his thumb over his shoulder. "Back there. "

"That was pretty careless," said the younger brother. "That was an expensive horse."

Jimmy said, "I know. But I didn't feel like carrying him. He was dead. ' I

"Pity. That was a really good horse."

"You don't miss him nearly as much as I do," said Jimmy.

"Would you like a ride?" asked Dash.

Jimmy stopped, turned, and regarded his brother. Neither son of Lord Arutha, Duke of Krondor, resembled the other. James looked like his grandmother, slight, blond, and possessing features that could only be

called finely drawn, with sapphire eyes. Dash looked like his grandfather,

with tight curls of light brown hair, dark eyes, and a mocking expression.

In nature, they were as alike as twins. "About time you offered," said

Jimmy, reaching up to take Dash's hand.

He swung up behind his brother and they rode slowly toward the city.

"How bad was it?" asked Dash.

"Worse," said Jimmy.

"Worse than we thought?"

"Worse than anything we could have imagined."

Dash said nothing more, knowing his brother would report directly to the Prince, and that Dash would hear every detail.

Jimmy took the hot cup of coffee, sweetened with honey and made rich with cream, and nodded his thanks. The servant quickly departed, closing the door behind him. Jimmy sat in the Prince's private chamber,

Jimmy put his cup down on the table and started removing his heavy

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cloak as he said, "I got to Krondor. It took some doing, but most of the remaining soldiers between here and there are nothing more than bandits.

After a couple of months of snow, rain, and sleet, they are dug in, hugging their fires and trying hard to stay alive.?)

"What of Krondor?" Patrick asked.

Jimmy said, "It's almost deserted. There were a few people around, but no one wanted to talk to me, and frankly, I wasn't anxious to strike

up many conversations myself. Most of those I caught a glimpse of were soldiers, foraging for what they could find in the rubble."

Jimmy stretched, as if tired. He took another sip of coffee. "Though what they could possibly find is beyond me." He looked at Patrick.

"Highness,

Krondor looks like nothing I've seen before or could dream of in my worst nightmare. Every stone blackened, and almost no board unburned.

The smell of char still lingers in the air and it's been months since the fires. Rain and snow have yet to cleanse the city.

"The palace-"

"What of the palace?" asked Patrick, his voice anxious.

levelled. All the buildings in the western third of the city have been gutted
or reduced to rubble, as if the fires burned the hottest there."
Arutha, Duke of Krondor, nodded. His father, Lord James, who had preceded him in his office, had fired the city to trap the invaders inside
the flames, and had died, along with his mother, in doing so. Arutha knew
the placement of Quegan fire oil in the sewers below the city would have
concentrated the damage where his father would have judged it most appropriate,
at the docks, near the ships unloading troops, then throughout the maze that had been the poor quarter of the city, then the merchant
quarter.
"The central third of the city is seriously damaged, but there may be a building or two that can be salvaged on every street. The rest will have
to be razed before any construction can begin. The easternmost third is
also heavily damaged, but many of the buildings there can be restored."
"What of the outlying estates?" asked Erik, thinking of his friend Rupert's large house, a day's ride to the east of Krondor.
"Many burned to the ground; others were sacked and left empty. A few of them were being used as headquarters for what I took to be companies
of the invaders, so I didn't get too close," answered Jimmy. He sipped at his coffee.

view of High Street and Palace Road, as well as several other byways from the north gate."

"The men?" prompted Owen Greylock.

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c: maiiungs usea oy rne mercenary companies, General

Dukoxl I-I0 CLI,I

is now on his way to Krondor or is already there."

Erik swore. Then he glanced at Patrick and said, "Sorry, Highness."

Patrick said, "I understand. All the reports I've read tell me Duko

is

a worthy foe."

Erik said, "He's more than a handful. He kept constant pressure on

our northern flank along Nightmare Ridge, without wasting soldiers.

He's

the closest thing the invaders have to a Kingdom general in his

knowledge

of tactics and deployment."

Owen nodded. "If he's in Krondor, and ordered to hold it, our job

just became a great deal more difficult."

Patrick looked worried but stayed silent a moment. Then he said,

"Why would they move into Krondor in strength? There's nothing left,

they don't need it to protect their southern flank. Could they know

of our

new base down at Port Vykor?"

, "Perhaps," said Owen. "Or they simply wish to keep us from using

Krondor as a forward base."

Patrick suddenly looked tired, and worried, thought Jimmy. After

another

long silence, the Prince said, "We need more information than we

have. "

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eastern gate to get free before they spotted me. I got out of the city, but ran right into a patrol between Krondor and Ravensburg. I managed to get loose from them in the woods, but they killed my horse." Patrick said, "Patrol? That far east?" Owen nodded and said, "Erik?"

Erik's expression showed he was as perplexed as anyone else in the room. "We've gotten reports from refugees that General Fadawah might be pushing south again, or at least is making his presence known. If Duke's in Krondor, those rumors are true. But to have patrols already that far east means they're quickly deploying to welcome us should we march home."

Patrick said, "It's icy hell out there. What's he up to?"

"If we knew that," said Dash dryly, "we wouldn't have to go slogging about in that icy hell."

Owen smiled. Duke Arutha tried to hide his own amusement, but failed.

Patrick said, "True," ignoring the breach of protocol. The winter shared in close quarters had turned this group into a fairly informal band

of friends when court wasn't in session.

The invaders had been defeated at the Battle of Nightmare Ridge, but the destruction done to the Western Realm of the Kingdom of the Isles was unimaginable. As spring approached, and with it the ability to move

his forces, Patrick was desperately trying to imagine what had happened to his principality.

Jimmy glanced at his father, who shook his head slightly, warning

him from making any comment. Dash allowed his brother the confirmation

that what the Prince had just said was thoughtless by raising his eyebrows ever so slightly.

Patrick said, "We've got a massive front to the south, and all the major units of the Army of the East are ready to answer any invasion from Kesh, but we have limited resources to reclaim the Western Realm.

Jimmy said nothing.

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Finally the Prince noticed Jimmy, nodded and waved his hand.

"Dismissed.

Get some clean clothing and bathe. We'll discuss this again at length after the evening meal."

Jimmy left, finding his father and brother following him out of the room. They paused just outside the door. Arutha said, "I've got to get

back inside, but I just wanted to see if you were all right."

"I'm fine," said Jimmy, with a faint smile of appreciation for his father's concern. With the death of their grandparents, Arutha's features

had taken on a drawn, haggard edge, from too much worry and too little

sleep. "Just some cold toes."

Arutha nodded, squeezed his son's shoulder a moment. "Get some food and rest. This isn't half over, and while Patrick may be ready to

storm the enemy, we need a great deal more information. " He opened the door and returned inside to the Prince's council. Dash said,

"I'll go

Erik's own mother now lived in one of the buildings close by the castle-the long history of animosity between her and the Dowager Baroness

made it prudent to keep the two women separated. The Baroness had been humiliated publicly for years by Erik's mother Frieda over Erik

being the Legitimate son of the late Baron Otto. Erik's stepfather, Nathan,

was furiously working in the Barony's smithy, readying weapons and other iron goods for the coming spring campaign. It was a socially awkward

situation at times, but Erik enjoyed having his family close by.

Erik sat. "You all right?" he asked Jimmy.

"Just tired. Came close to not making it once, but it's not much of a story. I had just lost my horse and had to hide from a patrol for a while,

and damn near froze hiding under a log. The snow was falling so they didn't track me after I had crossed some rocks, but I could barely move

when they finally left."

"Frostbite?" asked Erik.

"Don't know," said Jimmy. "I haven't taken my boots off. My fingers are fine." He wiggled them.

"Down the hall from the Prince's quarters next to my own. His name

is Herbert. Tell him who you are; you look like a rag-picker."

Dash watched his brother leave and said, "As his feet thawed he could barely walk. I think that priest is going to earn his keep."

Erik took a cup of coffee from Milo, said thanks, then turned to Dash.

"He already has. I've got a score of men fit for duty who would still be

laid up if it wasn't for that priest. And Nakor.

could use a rest."

"We all could," said Erik. Then he shook his head. "But you're not being spared, my friend, for we're all going."

"Where?" asked Dash.

"Kronador. Patrick can't sit here forever. And if what your brother has

reported jibes with the other reports we're getting, the longer we wait, the

I We have a healing priest here. The Temple of Dala, at Rillanon, sent

one to provide advice to the Prince." into having one

Dash grinned. ,you mean the King bullied them

close by in case Patrick was wounded."

"Something like that," admitted Erik as he returned the smile. "Have him look at your feet. It wouldn't do to have you going toeless."

Jimmy chewed, then swallowed. "Why am I suspicious you're motivated more by my fitness for duty, Captain, than out of any concern for my well-being?"

Erik shrugged theatrically. "Because you have a reasonable comprehension

of how things work in court?"

Jimmy suddenly looked very tired, as if letting down his mask. "How soon?" he asked.

Erik looked sympathetic. "The end of this week. Three, four days."

ii nodded He stood and said "I'd better find that priest."

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stronger Fadawah's forces are going to get in Kronador. We may have to

"The Eagles," said Erik, naming the special command of soldiers that had been gathered and trained by Dash and Jimmy's grandfather, Lord James, the late Duke of Krondor. "We'll have some auxiliaries, Duga's crew"-he named a large force of former mercenaries who had come over to the Kingdom's side during the invasion-"and we'll be working with Captain Subai's Pathfinders."

"That's all?" asked Dash.

"That's all to start," said Erik. "We're not trying to conquer all of the

Principality in the first week." He sipped at his coffee. "We were going to find a likely place to hold so we can stage, then we ride in and secure Krondor."

"Sounds easy," said Dash in a sarcastic tone. "If there wasn't another army already there." He studied Erik's face. "There's something else going

on. Why is Patrick in such a hurry to secure the city? I can think of a half-dozen better places from which to stage a retaking of the West if I

didn't care about Krondor; we could cut it off and starve out whoever's

there, staging from a camp to the east."

"I know," said Erik, "but part of it is pride. It's Patrick's city, the

capital of his realm. He was Prince of Krondor for only a short while before it was lost. And he followed a legend in that office."

Dash nodded. "Growing up in Rillanon, Jimmy and I met Prince Arutha only a few times; when I was old enough to appreciate him, he was getting on in years. But what my father and others said about him made him impressive, even then." He looked at Erik a moment, then

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to clear the harbor, maybe more. As it is now, I have no idea if
Kronдор

will ever become the shipping center it once was.

"But we have a new port south of there, in Shandon Bay, Port Vykor,
and for it to be any use to us, we have to insure we have a clear
trade

route between there and the rest of the West, which means Kronдор
needs

to be secured. We don't need it, but we certainly can't have
Fadawah's

generals using it as a base to attack us." He lowered his voice, as
if not

wishing for a perverse fate to overhear. "If we get cut off from Port
Vykor,

we may never reunite the Eastern and Western Realms."

Dash nodded. "That makes sense."

Erik put down his now empty mug and said, "That's about all that
does."

Dash nodded in agreement as Erik stood. Looking up at the tall,
powerfully

built captain, he said, "I haven't seen my sometime employer about
lately. How fares your friend Rupert?"

Erik smiled. "Roo is hauling some ridiculous amount of goods
through mud and ice to be first into Darkmoor with what we need."

Then

Erik laughed. "He told me he's the richest man in the world,
according

re-departed. Dash pondered what had been said there, amidst the bustle of the kitchen, then rose to find Jimmy and see how he fared.

The priest was just departing Jimmy's quarters when Dash arrived. Sitting on the bed next to his brother, who lay under a heavy wool blanket, Dash said, "That was quick."

"He gave me something to drink, washed my feet in an unguent, then told me to get some sleep."

"How bad are they?"

"I was going to lose toes, at least," said Jimmy, "if he hadn't been here." With a nod of his head he indicated the departed priest.

("You paint a pretty bleak picture of what's out there.")

Jimmy sighed. "I saw places where men had stripped the bark off of trees to make soup."

Dash sat back. "Patrick's not going to be happy."

"What's happened here while I was gone?" asked Jimmy, stifling a yawn.

Dash said, "We've got reports that things are stable up north, though

no one has seen sign of that bastard Duko lately."

Jimmy said, "If Fadawah is sending Duko south, Krondor could be very difficult to seize."

"Yes," agreed Dash. "Kesh is not happy about what went on down in Stardock, and we've got elements of the garrison of Ran and half of

the King's Own down near Landreth, just waiting for an excuse to move south. Kesh has pulled away from Shamata, but they're a lot closer than

Patrick likes, and the vale is once again a no-man's-land.

Negotiations are

underway, even as we speak."

"The East?" asked Jimmy, this time unable to stop the yawn.

to living
in a tent in the burned-out remains of Krondor, irrespective of the
rank
of Duchess."

Jimmy closed his eyes. "She and Aunt Polina are most likely shopping
right now, or having gowns fitted for a banquet or dance."

"Most likely," agreed Dash. "But it's hard on Father. You've been
away for most of the winter, and the few times you've been here
you've
seen him when he's busy."

,"Grandfather and Grandmother?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes," said Dash. "when he's alone and thinks I don't notice, he
broods. He knows there was nothing he could do, but he silently rages
about it. I hope once spring comes and we start the campaign he'll
snap
out of it, but he's drinking more than he used to and seems withdrawn
most of the time."

When Jimmy said nothing, Dash glanced at his brother and saw his
chin on his chest, his eyes half-closed as he fought to remain awake.
Dash

quietly stood up and moved to the door. He took a long look at his
brother, and for a moment saw an echo of their dead grandmother in
his

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features, the pale skin and nearly white blond hair. Finding a tear
coming

her
cause of her rape at the hands of Erik's half brother and Erik was
closest friend. They had been like brother and sister as children,
and he
was the first person she turned to when in distress. Dash watched as
she
came to the Captain's door and started knocking.
Erik opened the door and said, "What?"
Dash hesitated a moment, then continued to walk past as Rosalyn
said, "It's the Baroness. She's refusing to let me bathe my own son!
It's
just one more thing she's taken from me! Do something!"
Dash stopped and said, "Excuse me."
Both Erik and Rosalyn turned to the young man. "Yes?" asked Erik.
"I hesitate to intrude on the basis of overhearing a conversation I'm
not party to, but to avoid any embarrassment, may I make an
observation."
"What?" said Rosalyn.
"Given her somewhat ... forceful nature, the Dowager Baroness has
actually been rather leisurely in acquainting your son with his new
office."
Rosalyn shook her head. She had been a pretty girl growing up in
Ravensburg with Erik, but the birth of two children, hard work in her
husband's bakery, and the travail of the recent war had put premature
grey in her hair and robbed her face of the softness Erik had known
in
his youth. Her eyes were now hard, and she was leery of hearing
anything
from Dash that would further remove her from her son.
"Gerd is now Baron von Darkmoor," said Dash, trying to be patient
and instructive without sounding patronizing. Rosalyn might be an
untutored
common woman, but she wasn't stupid. "For the rest of his life,
many of the things you did for him will be done by servants. Had you

will spend most of his day with tutors and instructors. He needs to learn to read,,, to write, the history of his people, riding, weapons, court protocol ...

Erik nodded, putting his hand on Rosalyn's shoulder. "Dash is right. The young woman looked defiant and Erik felt her shoulder tense under his hand. He smiled. "But there's no reason you can't stand nearby and watch as the servants care for him."

Rosalyn said nothing for a moment, then nodded and turned off to retrace her steps to where her son was housed in the Baron's quarters of the castle. Erik watched her retreating back, then turned to Dash.

"Thank, for pointing things out."

"I hesitated to insert myself into your conversation, but it's only the truth. "

Erik glanced down the hall to the corner where Rosalyn had turned out of sight and let his eyes fix on the distant space. "So many changes.

We all have so much to adjust to."

Dash said, "Again, I don't mean to presume, Captain, but if you require any assistance . . ."

Erik smiled. "I suspect I will. And I will count on you and your brother. If you haven't heard yet, you're both being assigned to my command. '

anyway, concerned Erik, the King has his hands full in the East, with most of his army absent and his navy sunk, in keeping the Eastern Kingdoms from starting trouble. The Prince has Kesh in the South, so that leaves it to our merry little band to reclaim the West."
"Why does that not fill me with joy?" asked Dash rhetorically.

"I believe you would be in need of a healing priest if it did. You would obviously be bereft of your senses. "

"When does this campaign begin?" asked Dash.

"When you hear the first sound of ice breaking in the West, start packing.)?"

Dash said, "I heard ice break this morning.

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"Well, get packing," said Erik. "We leave for Kronдор within the week."

Dash nodded. "Very good, Captain."

As Dash turned away, Erik said, "One other thing."

"what, sir?" asked Dash.

"Your office as Court Baron does you no good in the army, so you and James are both being given the rank of Knight-Lieutenants."

"Thank you, I think," said Dash.

"Tomorrow head down to the quartermaster and draw uniforms for yourself and James."

"Sir," said Dash with a weak salute, then he turned and walked toward his own quarters. Muttering to himself, he said, "Damn. I'm in the army.)~

Jimmy tugged at his ill-fitting black tunic. "Damn. I'm in the army."

Dash laughed. He gently elbowed his brother, indicating the Prince was about to speak.

something
funny in almost any situation, no matter how bleak.
Prince Patrick said, "Of course it does," looking directly at Dash.
Dash had the good grace to blush before his Prince.
"But we can arrange to transport them home at a later time. First
they
must surrender."

Dash tried to wish himself invisible.
Patrick continued. "Intelligence confirms that this General Fadawah
is seizing the opportunity created by the Emerald Queen's defeat to
fashion
a little Empire for himself."
He walked to a map and took a pointer and indicated the area between
Kronдор and Ylith. "From Sarth to Ylith, Fadawah's forces are in
complete
control." The pointer swept to the east. "They control the forests up
to the mountains, and most of the passes to Nightmare Ridge. We have
a stable front along the ridge.

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pointer moved north of Ylith-"he's run into
"To the north"-the
some stern opposition at LaMut. Earl Takari's holding the city, but
barely.
Only the harsh winter kept Fadawah from taking the city." Looking at
Arutha, he said, "Tell me of Duke Carl."

Arutha said, "The Duke is a boy. He's barely seventeen. Earl Takari
is only three years older."
The men in the room knew the fathers of the two nobles mentioned
had died in the invasion. Arutha continued, "But Takari is Tsurani
stock,

Almost to himself Patrick said, "But come spring he'll be inside the walls of LaMut, and all the Tsurani honor in that city won't keep him from doing it." Patrick was silent a moment, then said, "Can Duke Carl's forces save LaMut?"

"Yes," said Owen. "If we can assume we'll have no trouble from the Brotherhood of the Dark Path"-he used the common term for the moredhel, the dark elves who lived to the north-"and count on the elves and dwarves, and the Free Cities keeping the western front stable, then Carl can strip his garrison, leaving what he must along his eastern flank,

and move the bulk of his men south to LaMut. He should be able to hold Fadawah under those circumstances. "

"If he does, can he then retake Ylith?" asked Patrick.

Akee glanced at Erik and Arutha, both of whom nodded to him. Akee looked at Patrick and said, "No, he cannot. He would need three times the number of swords he has at his call to stand a chance of retaking Ylith. He can hold where he is, unless this General Fadawah turns his entire force northward-which he won't do if he's moving soldiers south to hold Krondor-but Duke Carl cannot retake Ylith."

"My lords and gentlemen," said the Prince, "LaMut is, by necessity, the anvil." He looked at Owen Greylock and said, "My Lord Marshal, Your army must by needs be the hammer."

Owen said, "It's a small hammer, Patrick."

...mans as with your sailing 10100.

Owen said, "That's barely twenty thousand men, against how many.?

A hundred thousand?"

Patrick said, "We can't just let them keep what they've taken until we resolve these other issues, can we?"

His question was greeted by silence.

Patrick looked from face to face in the room. "I'm not ignorant of the

flaws of my own ancestors. We took every inch of land from somebody else to make the Western Realm. Only Yabon joined the Kingdom

willingly,

and that because we saved them from the Brotherhood of the Dark

Path, else they would have fallen.

"But the only reason there's a Baron von Darkmoor in the first place is the bandit ancestor of your own Captain Erik was too tough a nut

to

crack, and it was easier to make him a Kingdom noble and let him keep the land he had already taken than it was to kill him and put some

king's

idiot nephew here in his place." Patrick's voice began to rise. "And several

other accommodations have been made over the years, allowing former enemies to become valued vassals." Now his voice was raised to the

point

of yelling. "But I'll be damned to the Seventh Hell if I let some murdering

bastard set himself up as 'King of the Bitter Sea' and rule over my Principality.

If Fadawah does, it will be with one foot on my dead body!"

Dash and James exchanged glances. They didn't need to say anything.

The message was clear. Owen Greylock and Erik von Darkmoor, and what remained of the Armies of the West, would have to retake the

Principality

without any outside assistance.

Silence returned to the hall.

Greylock said, "We move in the morning. I expect to have advanced units in Ravensburg by nightfall, and scouts to the walls of Krondor by

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the end of the week." He glanced from face to face, then said, "You know what to do."

The men began to file out of the room, and Erik came to stand before

Dash and James. "You're with me," he said, turning and walking toward a small door off to one side.

The brothers found their father waiting in the room already, and in moment Greylock entered, closing the door behind. "I just wanted to I you two know," said Owen, addressing the brothers, "that you're going to be given the dirtiest, most thankless job we've got."

Dash smiled. "Smashing!"

Jimmy threw his brother a dark look, and said, "What is it?"

"Jimmy, you're in charge of our special advance unit."

"Special advance unit?" asked Jimmy.

Arutha nodded. "Him," he said, pointing to Dash.

Dash rolled his eyes heavenward but said nothing. He had long ago accustomed himself to being under his older brother's thumb, but they were working together.

Arutha said, "Owen said he needed a couple of sneaky bastards to operate behind enemy lines." He smiled at his sons. "I told him your parentage wasn't in doubt, but that you were sneaky enough for the job.",

1330.
Dash grinned, but his tone was mocking. Oh, joy. We're playing at spies again."

. Jimmy again looked at his brother as if he were crazy.
'You do find the oddest things entertaining."

Arutha looked at his two sons and said, "We just got confirming intelligence that Duko has come south."

"That's the stick in the anthill, isn't it?" said Dash.

Arutha nodded. "Indeed. If Duko gets established in Krondor before we do, he threatens Port Vykor. Cut off Vykor and we have no communications with the fleet; cut off the fleet, and we have no chance to resupply from the Sunset Islands and the Far Coast."

Owen said, "It might be a feint, with Sarth being his real objective. But there's a report that a second force moves south along the road from

Hawk's Hollow under the command of Nordan, Fadawah's second."

"That's a lot of soldiers slogging through the ice and mud," said jimmy.

Arutha said, "Krondor's harbor is useless; Fadawah knows this. We don't know if he knows of Vykor's harbor down in Shandon Bay, but if he does, then this isn't a feint."

Jimmy glanced at his brother, then said to his father, "So you want us to find out which?"

"if possible," said Arutha. "If he's just trying to slow down our march, so he can reinforce Sarth, we have to know."

Dash looked around the room, then asked, "Anything else?"

Arutha said, "Stay alive?"

Jimmy smiled. "We always plan on that, Father."

Arutha came and embraced his sons, Dash first, then Jimmy.

Dash said, "Come on, we have some riding to do this night."

lay
in the cold mud he wished for the ice again. The ooze slowed travel
and
he didn't seem able to get dry, even when staying close to a fire at
night.

They had heard voices in the woods ahead a few minutes ago, had
dismounted, tied their horses, and advanced on foot. As the sound of
approaching feet grew louder, Dash chanced a glance over the edge of
the

berm, and saw a ragged band of travelers looking about in a fearful
manner

as they moved eastward along the King's Highway. There was a man
and woman, and children, three of them though one-Dash couldn't tell
if it was a girl or boy under the heavy hood-seemed almost of adult
height.

*Dash stood as Jimmy came from behind the boulder. The man in the
van of the small party of refugees pulled a wicked-looking hand
scythe

from under his ragged cloak and held it in menacing fashion as the
others
turned as if to flee.

"Hold!" Jimmy shouted. "We'll not harm you."

The man looked dubious, the others fearful, but they halted their
movement. Jimmy and Dash both put away weapons and slowly approached.

The man didn't lower his scythe. "Who be you?" he said, his words
heavily accented.

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Jimmy and Dash exchanged glances, for the man spoke with the accent
of one who had come from Novindus. This man at one time had
been a soldier with the invading army of the Emerald Queen.

Jimmy was trying to reach himself. He heard shore's food shore.

Jimmy nodded. "Some. Where are you from?"

"Tannerus," said the woman.

Dash pointed at the man. "He's not from Tannerus."

The man nodded. He motioned at himself with his free hand and said, "Markin. From City of the Serpent River." He glanced around. "Long way from here."

"You were a soldier of the Emerald Queen?" asked Jimmy.

The man spat on the ground and it looked as if the gesture was taking most of his strength. "I spit on her!" He started to wobble and the woman

put her arms around him.

"He's a farmer," she said. "He told us his story when he came to

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Jimmy looked at Dash, then motioned with his head back toward the horses. Dash didn't need to be told what was on his brother's mind.

He

turned and walked back while Jimmy said, "why don't you tell us his story. II

"My man went to fight for the King," said the woman. "Two years ago." She glanced back at the three children and said, "My girls are fit

to work; Hildi's almost grown. We did all right for the first year.

Then

the soldiers came and took the town. Our farm was far enough away we weren't troubled for a while."

Dash returned leading the horses. He handed the reins to Jimmy, then went back and opened a saddlebag. He returned a moment later, unwrapping

a bundle. Once opened, he revealed some heavy travel bread, thick

on the heavy bread. After swallowing, the woman said, "When the soldiers came, we hid in the woods, and they took everything. We had only what we had carried away. Then out of spite they burned the roof off our house and broke down the door. Sticks and thatch was all it was, but it was the only home the girls had known."

She glanced about, afraid other threats might appear suddenly from the surrounding woods. "Markin found us when we were trying to rebuild our house. It was never what you'd call fine, but my man had spent years adding to it, making it more than just a hut. But the soldiers had burned it down and the girls and me had no tools."

"I find them," said Markin. "They needed help."

"He came and he fought for us. Other men came, many with swords and bows, but he kept them from taking me or the girls." She glanced at him with obvious affection in her eyes. "He's my man now, and he's a fair da' to the girls."

Jimmy sighed. To Dash he said, "We'll hear stories like this one a hundred times before we're through."

"Why Darkmoor?" asked Jimmy.

"We hear the King's there and there's food for the asking."

Jimmy smiled. "No, the King's not there, though he was last year.

But there's food for work."

"I work good," said the foreign-born soldier.

"Can we go?" asked the woman.

"Yes," said Dash, motioning for them to pass.

Markin said, "You soldiers?"

Jimmy grinned. "Not if we can help it."

"First time I regretted having comfortable boots," said Dash.
Jimmy looked down and said, "Well, we may be muddy, but he's

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right." Glancing around, he added, "This is a place of little food
and even

less comfort. "

Dash remounted his horse. "I suspect by the time we get to Kronдор
we won't look quite so prosperous."

Jimmy also mounted, and said, "Maybe we should get off this high

way. ~ y s one-time

Dash said, "The north road?" He referred to an old road his
employer, Rupert Avery, used regularly to move goods, avoiding the
tolls

charged on the King s Highway.

Jimmy shook his head. "No, that's almost as busy as this one, and
those woods are going to be full of deserters and bandits."

"The south?"

"Slower going, but there are enough trails along the lakes if we
don't

head too far into the southern hills."

Dash said, "Since Kesh pulled south to the old border, everything
from here to their nearest garrison is going to be wilderness."

Jimmy laughed. "What's the difference if we run into fifty deserters
from the Emerald Queen's army, or fifty bandits, or fifty Keshian
mercenaries. . ."

He shrugged.

Dash made a show of shivering under his heavy cloak. "Let's hope
whoever's down there is hugging their fires. As any sane man would
do."

The sound of cracking ice rang through the cold morning air and both brothers pulled up just before entering a clearing. Using hand signals, Jimmy motioned for Dash to move south along the edge of the clearing while he circled north. Dash nodded, dismounted, and tied his horse to the branch of a small birch tree. Jimmy did likewise and moved silently away. Dash moved through the thinning trees, bordering a burned-out farm, he judged from the appearance of tree stumps nearby. The sound resolved itself into a repeated hammering at ice.

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Dash saw a man in the distance. A slender figure, he crouched over the frozen ice on a large pond, perhaps a hundred yards away from where Dash watched, hammering at the ice with a rock. Up and down the rock moved, and Dash couldn't help but be fascinated with the sight. Dash couldn't get a good look at the man, but his clothing seemed a hodgepodge of rags and ill-matched garments. He might have worn boots, but all Dash could see was a collection of rags tied around each foot for warmth. Dash saw movement in the woods beyond the pond and judged Jimmy was in place. He waited. Jimmy walked slowly out of the woods and the man leaped to his feet with astonishing speed. He turned away as Jimmy shouted, "Wait! I won't

concerns, he quickly sheathed his sword. See 017.PP
The man got up slowly as Jimmy leaned over, hands on knees, and
said, "He's fast."

Dash grinned. "You'd have caught him had you had another mile or
so to overtake him. You've always had endurance, if not speed."

Turning

his attention to the figure on the ground, he said, "Who are you and
what

were you doing?"

The man slowly rose, as if ready to bolt at the slightest threat, and
said, "I am called Malar Enares, young masters." He was a slender

man,
with a hawk nose sticking out over a large rag wrapped around his
face.

His eyes were dark, and they shifted back and forth between the
brothers.

"I was fishing."

Jimmy and Dash exchanged glances, and Dash said, "With a rock?"

"To break the ice, young sir. Then when the fish comes up to sun
himself, I would strip bark and make a noose."

Jimmy said, "You were going to snare a fish?"

"It is easy if you but have patience and a steady hand, young sir."

Dash said, "I hear Kesh in your speech."

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"oh, no, mercy, young sir.

of Shamata, Kiran Hessen."

Jimmy and Dash had both heard the name. A trader with Keshian
connections who did a great deal of business with the late Jacob
Esterbrook.

Since the destruction of Krondor, the boys' father, Lord Arutha,
had pieced together several accounts that had clearly indicated two
facts,

and show us how you planned on catching those fish," said Dash.

"If I might have some hair from your horses' manes," said the ragged man. "Then it would be so much easier."

"Horses?" asked Dash.

"Two young noblemen such as yourselves didn't walk into this forsaken wilderness, I am certain," supplied Malar. "And

them snorting a moment again." He pointed. "That way."

Jimmy nodded. "That's fair."

"What do you need hair from their manes for?" asked Dash.

"Let me show you."

He walked toward the place where Dash's horse had been tied, and

said, "The ice was almost broken when you startled me, young sir. If

you

would but use the hilt of your sword to break it open, that would be

a

great service. "

Jimmy nodded and started back toward the icy pond.

Dash asked, "Now, about how you came to be lost in this forsaken wilderness."

"As you are no doubt aware," began Malar, "there was much trouble between Kesh and the Kingdom lately, with Shamata for a time being deeded to the Empire."

"So we had heard," said Dash.

"My master, being of Kingdom allegiance, decided it wise to visit his holdings in the North, first in Landreth, then Krondor.

"We were traveling to Krondor when we encountered the invaders.

We were overtaken and my master and most of his other servants were

put to the sword. I and a few others managed to flee into the hills,

south

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

I am but a humble servant of a great trader

yanked out some more hairs. He repeated the procedure twice more.

"That is sufficient," he observed.

"So you've been in these hills how long?"

"More than three months, young sir," said Malar, as he started deftly weaving the hair into a braid. "It has been a bitter time. Some of my companions died from hunger and cold, and two were captured by a band of men-outlaws or invaders, I do not know which. I have been alone for all of three weeks or so, I judge." He sounded apologetic as he said,

"it is difficult to keep track of time."

"You've survived in these woods for three weeks with nothing but your bare hands?" asked Dash.

Malar started walking toward the pond, continuing to weave the horse hair. "Yes, and a terrible thing it has been, sir."

"How?" asked Dash.

"As a boy I was raised in the hills above Landreth, to the north of the Vale of Dreams. Not as hostile a land as this, but still a place where

the unwary can perish easily. My father was a woodsman, who put food on your table with bow and snare, as well as gold in his pouch from guiding men through the hffis."

Dash laughed. "He guided smugglers."

"Perhaps," said Malar with a broad shrug. "In any event, while the winters in the hills near my home are nowhere near as inhospitable as here, still a man must have skills to survive."

Malar moved slowly as he approached the hole. He glanced skyward to see the angle of the sun, then moved to face it. "Do not let your shadow

cross the hole," he instructed.

Dash and Jimmy followed behind. The man from the Vale of Dreams slowly knelt and said, "Fish, I have been taught, see movement, so we must move ever so slowly."

Dash said, "This I must see."

snare toward the fish's tail.

After another long minute, the fish darted away, and Malar said,

"Another

will come. They see the fight and think insects may land upon the surface. "

After a silent five minutes, a trout appeared near the edge of the hole.

Dash couldn't tell if it was the same fish or a different one. Malar again

started moving the noose slowly and got it around the fish's tail.

With a

jerk, he snared the trout and yanked it out of the hole, landing it on the

ice, where it flopped.

Dash couldn't see the man's face behind the rags that covered it, but the crinkles around his eyes showed Malar was smiling. "If one of you young gentlemen would be so kind as to light a fire, I will catch some

more."

Jimmy and Dash exchanged glances, then Jimmy shrugged. Dash

said, "I'll get some wood. You find a campsite."

They hurried off while the strange man from the Vale of Dreams sought out another fish for supper.

For three days they moved slowly toward Krondor. Several times they

heard distant voices and the sound of

men moving through the woodland

lands, but they had avoided contact with anyone.

Jimmy and Dash both found Malar an enigma. He had surprising

skills for wilderness survival, odd for one claiming to be the

servant of a

rich trader. On the other hand, Jimmy had confided to his brother, the

Monday they heard news in the distance, from the north. Jimmy spoke at a low conversational level. "Duko's men moving along the I way?"

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Dash nodded. "Probably. If we can hear them from here, we've headed back toward the highway." He turned to Malar. "Do you know of any southern route to Krondor?"

"Only the highway that loops around from Land's End, young sir.

But if we are nearing the King's Highway, within a few days we should start encountering farms."

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Jimmy was silent for a long moment, then said, "They'll almost certainly be burned out."

"But," suggested Dash, "if they are, no one is likely to be living in them, and we might slip into the city unnoticed."

"No farmers, you mean," corrected Jimmy. "But they'd be decent shelter for some very unpleasant men with a fondness for weapons, I bet."

Dash's brow furrowed, as if thinking he should have thought of that, but a moment later, his grin returned and he said, "Well, then, we

will

just blend in. You've told me often enough how unpleasant I can be,

and

I am certainly fond of my weapons."

Jimmy nodded. "Two more hired swords will scarcely be noticed.

And if we can get close to the city, we'll find a way inside. There are

enough holes in the walls, that's for certain."

Malar said, "You've been to Krondor, then, young sir? Since the war, I mean."

lakes
began to lose their frozen skins. Large mounds of snow fell from
trees in
sudden, wet attacks on the travelers, while everywhere water dripped
from
branches. The footing beneath their feet alternated between crusty
patches
of ice and thick mud which gripped at boots and horses' hooves. The
constant noise was a backdrop against which the occasional sounds of
spring could be heard. The distant call of a bird that had returned
from
the south early, seeking others of its kind. The faint rustle in the
distance
Of small creatures coming out of their winter's burrows stirred as
they
passed, only to resume after a while.
When they paused to rest, Jimmy tied his horse to a low tree branch
and motioned for Dash to do likewise. Dash did as he was bid, and
said,
"Keep an eye out. We're going to relieve ourselves." He moved to
where
Jimmy stood, making a show of urinating into the snow.
Dash did likewise, whispering, "what is it?"

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"Have you formed an opinion of our chance companion?" asked the
older brother. is head slightly, saying, "Not really. I,m certain
he's
Dash shook h
more than he claims, but I have no idea what."
"There's not a lot of fat on him," said Jimmy, "but he doesn't move

remembering what their grandfather had cautioned them over the years about leaping to conclusions, Dash said, "Then we'd best not imagine anything.,,"

"Wait and see," agreed Jimmy.

They returned to the horses, and Malar hurried off to relieve himself away from the trail. When he was out of hearing range, they continued.

Jimmy asked, "Remember that abandoned farm a day's walk this side of where we met Malar?"

"The one with half a thatch roof and the fallen-down cow shed?"

"That's the one. If we bolt, and get separated, meet there."

Dash nodded. Neither chose to discuss what to do should the other never appear.

Malar returned and they started off. The servant from the Vale of Dreams had been as closemouthed as the brothers. Part of the reason was

the environment. The nights were still and even in the day noise carried.

They knew they were approaching an area likely to be patrolled by the invaders; they were leading their horses rather than riding them, as, even

in the woodlands, a rider presented a much higher profile in the distance

than a man on foot or a horse. Periodically they stopped to listen.

Rains came later that afternoon and they sought out what shelter they could, finding a hut of some sort, burned out, but with just enough thatch

to give slight respite.

Sitting atop their saddles, hastily removed to get them out of the weather, they took stock.

"We've got another day's grain, then we're done," said Dash, knowing his brother was just as aware of supplies as he.

Malar said, "Shouldn't there be winter grass under the snow, sirs?"

All conversation ceased and the three stopped walking as they listened.

The frigid days of winter had given way to a promise of spring, but it was still cold enough they could see their breath in the late afternoon

air. After a moment of silence, Dash was about to speak when a voice echoed from ahead. It spoke a language neither brother recognized, but

they knew it was the Yabonese-like tongue of the invaders.

Glancing around for a place to hide, Jimmy pointed and mouthed the word, There.

He indicated a large stand of brush that surrounded an outcropping of rocks. Dash wasn't sure they could secrete the horses behind it, but it

was the only thing nearby that offered shelter from whoever came their way.

Malar hurried around the upthrust rocks and pulled aside a low branch, allowing Jimmy and Dash to lead their horses around to a relatively sheltered hiding place. In the distance horses could be heard.

Dash's horse's nostrils flared and her head came up. Jimmy said, "What?"

"This witchy mare is in heat," whispered Dash as he tugged hard on her bridle. "Pay attention to me!" he demanded.

Malar said, "You ride a mare?"

"She's a good horse," insisted Dash.

"Most of the time!" agreed Jimmy, hissing his words. "But not now!"

Dash tugged on the horse's bridle, trying to focus her attention on himself. An experienced rider, Dash knew that if he could keep her attention,

she might not call out to the horses that were approaching.

held tight to the bridle and continued to speak softly to his
mare

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SHARDS OF A BROIKEN CROWN

as the horses came to the point of closest approach on the trail.

Suddenly

Dash's horse pulled backwards and her head came up. to him, but

For an instant there was a tiny hope she might come back

then she called out her greeting, a loud whinny.

Suddenly shouts filled the air and other horses

call Jimmy didn't hesitate. "That way!"

answered the mare's

Malar shoved through underbrush and ignored scratches from

branches as he went where Jimmy had directed. Jimmy came next,

leading

this gelding, eyes wide and nostrils flaring from excitement. The mare

arrayed on the trail. Then he was past
brother and Malar, and the chase was on.
From a vantage point a short distance off, Jimmy turned and saw the
riders wheel and charge after Dash. Malar, almost out of breath,
puffed
as he said, "Sir, will they catch him?"
Jimmy swore. "Probably. But if they don't, he should try to get back
to that farmhouse. That's what we planned."
"Shall we turn around?" asked the servant.
Jimmy was silent. After a moment he said, "No. Dash will either be
captured, in which case we can't help him escape, or he'll win free.
If he
gets back to that farmhouse we found the day we met you, he'll wait
one
or two days, then return to Darkmoor. If we go now, we'll have no
more
information than he will."
"We go to Krondor?"
"We go to Krondor," said Jimmy. He glanced around, seeking any
sign of other riders in the area. As the sound of Dash and his
pursuers
faded into the distance, he pointed and said, "That way."
As quietly as they could, the pair set off.

Dash rode as hard as he could, despite the balky mare, who wanted
to turn and greet the stallions behind. Every hint of hesitation from
her
brought a hard kick to her sides as he used every skill he had to
keep her
heading down a windy woodland trail made
overhanging branches, and sudden turns.

dangerous by mud and ice,

to them he was a dimly-seen figure on a horse moving through the long shadows of the woodlands, but as long as he stayed on the trail, they would be able to stay close and not lose him.

He had a rough idea where he was. There were a dozen or more woodland trails to the east of Krondor that led to farms throughout the area. He knew that eventually-if he outran his pursuers-he'd hit the King's Highway. A horse's scream and a panic-stricken rider's cry told

Dash that one of his pursuers' mounts had lost footing and was down, probably breaking a leg.

Dash glanced to the left and saw the trees thinning as he reached a clutch of farms, open fields that were dotted with burned-out buildings.

He hesitated for a moment, but to try to ride across muddy fields would

be far worse than staying on the trail. Here the mud was a nuisance, slippery muck over hardpan compacted by years of wagons, riders, and foot traffic. The mud in the fields was deep enough for an adult horse to

sink up to the point where it would be unable to move. The horse labored as Dash pushed her along the trail; lack of grain and fodder had shortened her endurance and she was blowing hard as she

struggled to obey his commands. Then he saw a stone path, and a glimmer of hope appeared.

He almost caused her to fall, so abruptly did he pull the mare around,

but once she got her feet back under her, she sped off in the desired direction. Dash said a silent prayer to Ruthia, Goddess of Luck, and gathered

his horse under him for a jump. The fence along the road was mostly

him off by veering into the muddy field. He smiled to himself.
Making sure the horse was heading exactly where he wanted, he
chanced another look back and saw that the horses in the field were
now

half buried, attempting to pull their hooves out of the deep, thick
muck.

Dash gained precious seconds as the riders who followed on the road

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chose to double back and work their way around the
had a chance.

The sun was now out of sight behind the trees ahead, as the long
shadows of late afternoon crept across the fields. He rode past a
yumedd

the door and

He continued

intact fence. He now

out farmhouse and saw the stone path he was on passe
continued on toward the foundation of a burned-out barn.

to ride, but slowed as he reached the terminus of the path.

Dash could only spare a moment to let the horse rest, as curses from
behind told him those trying to reach him were now also mired in the
mud. Dash judged the way to his right was more substantial footing

than

elsewhere-at least he hoped that was the case, and set off, letting

his

horse move at a trot until she slowed down due to the mud.

The sound of the mare's hooves hitting tightly compacted sand caused

at the end of their patrol, or they weren't getting enough to eat,
but for
whatever reason, they didn't look as if they had enough left to
overtake
him-as long as he could keep his own exhausted mare moving.
He reached the treeline and ducked under a low-hanging branch. As
quickly as he could, he picked his way among the trees, varying his
course
and trying to keep clear of those behind. He hoped there were no
trackers
behind, but then, considering the terrain, realized a blind man could
follow
his trail.

Glancing around he saw a small outcropping of rock that rose up a
slight incline and appeared to be flat on top. He turned the horse
and

walked her up the rise, and found the rock ran off along what
appeared
to be a smaller trail. He jumped off and led her down the trail.
Exhaustion was curbing her desire to call to the stallion, as she
could
barely catch enough breath to walk after Dash. 'He pulled her reins
and

she reluctantly set out at a fast walk behind him.
Shadows deepened as the sun lowered in the west, and Dash moved
deeper into the woods. If Jimmy and Malar had stayed clear of
pursuit'

they would be approaching the city several miles to the south. Dash
wondered
if he should attempt to cut back behind his pursuers and try to find

his brother and the stranger from the Vale of Dreams.

Dash considered the best that would bring him would be to get him

coming past the woodlands, at the edge of what had once been the
foulborough
outside the walls of Krondor. "I'm a mercenary from Landreth
and you're my servant."
"Dog robber," said Malar.
"What?"
"The term is 'dog robber.' To feed his master, a mercenary's servant
will steal scraps from a dog if necessary." The slender man smiled.
"I
have served as such. You, though, will be obviously false to any
Valeman
who might happen to be here."
"You think that likely?"
"It would be better should you be a young man from the East of the
Kingdom, who lately served in the Vale. Claim no company. Say you
worked for my departed master. I do not know what you expected to
find
in Krondor, young sir, but in the backwashes of war many things
happen.
We are seeing that ahead."
Jimmy was forced to admit that was true. Where he had seen nothing
but frost-covered stones and a few fires just weeks before, now he
saw
dozens of huts and tents, a veritable community springing up almost
overnight.
As they walked down the road, Malar leading Jimmy's horse,
Jimmy drank in the sights and sounds.
Evening was upon them and fires dotted the landscape. Hawkers
shouted from ahead, offering food, drink, the company of a woman.
Hard-looking
men lounged near fires, watching guardedly as Jimmy and Malar
moved past.
A man hurried over holding a steaming pot, and said, "Hot food!

Malar showed Jimmy to the stall. "Begone, a bowl of rice by master has no use for such foul-smelling garbage," he shouted. Instantly the two men were almost nose to nose, screaming insults at one another, and almost equally abruptly a deal had been struck.

Malar gave the man a copper coin, a ball of yarn he had been carrying in his pocket, and a very old rusty dagger.

The man gave over the pot and hurried back to his campfire where a woman offered him another crock of the hot stew. He set out to find another customer. Malar motioned for Jimmy to move to the side of the road and squatted, holding the crockery. He held it out and spoke softly,

"Eat first and give me what's left."

Jimmy squatted, not wishing to sit in the mud, and ate the stew. If it was rabbit, it had been a rabbit of diminutive stature, and even the carrots and turnips had a strange taste. Jimmy decided it best not to consider how long they had sat in some abandoned root cellar before that enterprising peddler had found them.

He ate half the contents of the bowl and gave the rest over to Malar. While his newfound servant ate, Jimmy looked around. He had seen enough military camps to recognize he had blundered into one.

Warriors, camp followers, peddlers and thieves, all resting until they had a reason to move on.

Jimmy wondered about the reason for the gathering, and the reason that would make them move on. Many of the warriors were from the invading army that had ravaged the Western Realm the year before, but

"Because he's ... Dash."

They moved through the tent village and headed toward the city gate.

Three

[G FROWNED.

The Keshian Ambassador's smile was forced, almost painful, as he finished his latest message from his government.

"My Lord Gadesh," said the Kingdom's representative, Baron Marcel

d'Greu, his own smile just as false. "That's impossible."

Pug glanced at Nakor, who sat to his right. The latest round of negotiations

between the Kingdom and the Empire of Great Kesh was proving to be a simple restatement of the last round.

Nakor shook his head and said, "Why don't we take a small recess, my lords, and give ourselves time to ponder these requests?"

Kalari, a Tsurani Black Robe who was representing his government, the Empire of Tsuranuanni, as a neutral observer, said, "Excellent idea, my friend."

The two ambassadors retired to the quarters that had been provided to them, and Pug led Nakor and Kalari to another room, where Miranda waited next to Kalied, the leader of the most powerful of the three factions

of magicians in Stardock.

Kalied appeared to be older than Pug, despite the fact Pug was nearly twenty years his senior. Pug appeared to be a man in his mid-twenties,

his rejuvenation courtesy of the freed life energies that had been trapped

in the Lifestone.

in appreciation at the flavor of the brew. He was a bald-headed man of middle age, still slender and fit and possessing a penetrating pair of blue eyes. "Is it my unfamiliarity with the nuances of the King's Tongue, or some lack of insight into the Keshian culture, or is this simply restating of previous claims and demands?"

"No," said Nakor, "there is nothing wrong with your appreciation of this situation."

"Then what is the point?" asked Kalari. "My own Empire's traditions include negotiations, but usually it's between Tsurani Lords. I'm afraid your notion of diplomacy is a little foreign to me."

Kalari had been sent by the Assembly of Magicians on Kelewan, to insure that whatever interests Tsuranuanni had in Stardock were represented.

Trading between the former enemies, the Kingdom of the Isles and the Empire of Tsuranuanni, had been cyclical over the years. For nearly fifty years a major upheaval in Tsurani society had resulted from the rise to prominence of House Acoma and their innovative leader, the Lady Mara, the Servant of the Empire. Her son, Justin, had ruled the Empire despite several political plots to return the Empire to the older traditions Mara had set aside. Turmoil had resulted from many of the changes, at various times limiting trade between the two worlds to a trickle, but currently a stable period had endured almost ten years, and the Empire wished to see nothing disrupt their commerce with Midkemia.

...so much.

Kalari regarded the strange fellow. Nakor had been given his seat at the negotiations by Pug. Known as Milamber on the Tsurani homeworld, Pug was a figure of legend, almost as awe-inspiring as the Lady Mara. That fact alone had blunted some of the Tsurani Great One's astonishment at Nakor being included in these sessions. To all outward appearances, the self-styled "High Priest" of some unknown order was nothing more than a ragged vagabond, perhaps a confidence trickster who played the fool. Yet there was something about the odd little man that made Kalari cautious of judging him too quickly. Behind his constant irreverent humor an intellect of great scope was at work, and every fiber of Kalari's

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being told him a man of great magical ability also wore the guise of a common gambler recently turned man of religion. He might claim powers that came from the Gods, or merely "tricks" as he often commented, but Kalari sensed this was a being of power second only to Pug's at the table. Kalari put aside his nagging suspicions about Nakor. Whatever else, he did find the man from the nation of Isalani in Great Kesh amusing and amiable. "Well, then," said the magician, "you'll have to brief me on how best to proceed with this pointless wrangling." Nakor said, "Find someone else. I think them just as tedious as you

that while the King wants troops back in the East, it's not because there's any real trouble there. If Kesh makes trouble, the King orders the Prince to keep the soldiers. And if Kesh waits until the Armies of the East leave, that gives Patrick more time to dig in, get ready, and deal with any Keshian adventures."

Nakor shook his head. "No, Kesh knows that they lost what the Kingdom gave them when they tried to press their advantage. They know the best they can do is maybe some trade concession or another, but they'll never get back what they were granted for protecting the Kingdom's southern flank." He glanced from face to face. "They're trying to figure out how to admit publicly they were stupid without admitting they were stupid."

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Kalari laughed. Even the usually taciturn Kalied was forced to smile. Pug said, "So it's a matter of honor?"

Nakor shrugged. "More a matter of avoiding punishment back home. Generals Rufi ibn Salamon and Behan Solan have much explaining to do to their Emperor when they return to the City of Kesh. They've got to be given a really good story to explain how they lost by getting greedy what

they had gained by the Emperor being generous. You know they had no authority from Kesh to try to grab all of the vale, don't you?"

Pug fixed Nakor with a narrow gaze. "And how do you know that?" asked Pug.

Nakor said, "I move around. I listen to things. Generals may keep

The
Keshian Confederacy would rise up again at any excuse, and your King
knows this. So, the Empire doesn't want war, and the Kingdom doesn't
want another war-they're busy with the one they have now-and we all
sit around while the outcome is already known."

"Save one thing," said Pug.

Nakor said, " Stardock. "

Kalied said, "That matter is settled."

Pug shrugged. "I know it is. I told Nakor to make whatever deal
necessary to get you to help save the Kingdom; the threat of you
acting

against Kesh if they turned aggressor tipped the balance in our
favor. But

there's still the matter of explaining to the King how I managed to
give

away one of his duchies."

Kalled said, "I am dining with the members of the council. As Robert
de Lyes has decided to continue serving in Darkmoor with the Prince,
we

need to replace him on the council." He rose and said, "But keep in
mind,

Pug, despite your legendary power and our abiding respect for what
you

founded here, Stardock is no longer your personal fiefdom. We have
Nakor'

s pledge that you would honor the arrangements he made to gain the
Kingdom our aid. The council now governs, not on your behalf while
you're off somewhere, but on behalf of all those who reside here. You
are

entitled to no more or less a voice than any other member of the
Academy.

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Pug was silent for a moment, then said, "Very well. I will honor that

in this matter." With a dark look directed at Nakor, he bowed to the others in the room and departed.

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Kalari turned to Nakor and said, "I assume your earlier comments on diplomacy are more in the theoretical area rather than from practice?"

Miranda laughed. Pug joined in. "Well, I still have a lot to explain

to the Prince, and I think there's no putting that off. I suspect that Patrick

will be even less enchanted with the idea of an autonomous Stardock within his borders than Kalied."

Miranda said, "We go to Darkmoor?"

Pug nodded. "Nakor?"

Nakor nodded. "I'm done here. The Blue Riders are again ensconced among the students, to make sure magicians who train here don't get too

stuffy. Besides, I need to spend some time with Dominic and some of the

other Ishapians who have ended up next to the Prince. Let me fetch Sho

Pi, and we'll all go together."

He left, and Kalari said, "Pug, a question."

Pug turned to regard the Tsurani Great One.

"Since coming to Stardock on behalf of the Emperor, I've pieced together

a view of how things stood here. I'm curious as to why you, yourself, didn't come to the Assembly and seek our aid in dealing with the threats from this Emerald Queen." He lowered his voice. "I'm not sure

discover
the secret of what truly happened at Sethanon at the end of the
Riftwar.
He had been motivated by loyalty to the Empire and the fear of some
Kingdom plot or weapon of great power, and had actually discovered
the
secret of the Lifestone. Through agents who chanced upon one another
near Sethanon, he had become a party to a conspiracy involving the
Brotherhood
of the Dark Path. Only the intervention of a renegade moredhel
chieftain had prevented a major catastrophe.
Makala and four of his allies from the Tsurani homeworld had
ensorceled
the great dragon oracle that lived below the city of Sethanon, and
were on the verge of unlocking the Lifestone when Pug and his
companions
had arrived. That secret had died with Makala and his four
companions,
deep in the chamber below the city. His betrayal of the trust given

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him had strained relationships between the Kingdom and Empire for a
decade. Only members of the Assembly on Kelewan and a few trusted
advisors to the Prince of Krondor knew of the incident; it served as
a
cautionary tale on both sides of the rift. Since then, all business
between
the Empire of Tsuranuanni and the Kingdom of the Isles had been
conducted
in the most formal, cautious of fashions. More than once it had
been suggested that the rift between the worlds be permanently
closed, yet

Arutha said, "What will you tell Patrick?"
Pug let out a long, tired sigh. "Many things; none of which he will enjoy hearing."

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Prince Patrick appeared on the verge of rage. His normally light complexion reddened and his voice rose. "Autonomous? What is that supposed to mean?" he shouted.

Pug sighed. Unlike his predecessor, Prince Arutha, Patrick lacked vision. Pug reminded himself that in most ways the Prince was a young man, and unlike Prince Arutha, who had leadership thrust upon him, a young man untempered in the cauldron of war. While his city had been destroyed, Patrick had been safe in the East, at the King's insistence. Pug suspected much of Patrick's ill humor came from frustration and his inability to do other than his father's bidding.

With even tones, Pug said, "The magicians at Stardock require-"
"Require!" shouted Patrick. "They require?" He stood up from his throne, formerly the state chair of the Baron of Darkmoor, and took a step down to stand directly before Pug. "Let me tell you what their King

requires. He requires their unswerving loyalty and obedience!"

Pug looked at his grandson, the Duke Arutha, who gave his head a slight shake, indicating there was little use in talking to the Prince when

he was in a rage. Pug didn't care. He was three times the Prince's age

and had seen more than most men did in a dozen lifetimes and he was

Wearying of the scene, Pug said, "Patrick, what's done is done. It's an unhappy solution, but at least it's a solution. You can't deal with the invaders to the west, Kesh to the south, and the magicians at Stardock.

You must start somewhere; Stardock is the easiest. With the community there guaranteed their autonomy, Kesh will have to remove itself back to the old border. That's two problems solved. Then you can reclaim the West."

Patrick said nothing, forcing himself to calm down. "I do not like it."

Nakor said, "The King won't like it much either, but he'll understand.

Prince Erland spent time in Kesh. He saved the Emperor and knows the Empress well. Very well," he added with a grin. "Erland will go down and visit again and soon things will be back to normal along this border."

"Except I'll have lost Stardock."

Pug said, "You'll lose a great deal more unless you agree." He looked the young prince squarely in the eyes. "Sometimes ruling is hard choices, between bad and worse. Agree that Stardock can rule itself, and you defeat Kesh."

Pug's wording made the young Prince pause. After a moment he spoke. "Very well. Prepare documents, my lord duke," he said, using Pug's formal rank as Duke of Stardock. "It is your duchy we're losing.

I'm sure Father will have another office or something for you. After all, he did explain you were some sort of royal cousin and need to be treated

to Rillanon. In fact, I command you to do so, my lord duke! Perhaps
being
wiser than I, the King can discern how this isn't some sort of
treason."
He glanced at Miranda. "If your wife isn't an agent of the Empire,
I'll be
astounded. "

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Pug's eyes narrowed and he remained silent.
"You'll need to demonstrate that loyalty I currently find lacking,
magician,
if you're to regain this court's favor."
"Demonstrate?" said Pug softly. "I have labored to MY utmost to
prevent the destruction of all we hold dear."
Patrick said, "I've read the reports. I've heard the tales. Demons
and
spawn of the lower hells. Yes, magic to warp the world to darkness,
and
all the rest of it. "
Arutha looked from one man to the other, saying, "Highness!
Grandfather,
please! We
have much to do and contention in our ranks does us no good."

Pug looked at his grandson, and slowly he said, "I am not attempting
to contend, Arutha. My only purpose has been, from the first, to
serve."
He stepped forward and his voice was filled with menace. "If you
command, my prince, I will obey. I will take the time to visit with
the

said, "1888? You dare speak to me of 1888? Stepping up so that he was mere inches from the Prince, Pug looked up at the taller, younger man. "I lost nearly everything, you child! I lost a son and a daughter, and the man she loved who was as another son to me. William, Gamina, and James gave their lives for Krondor and the Kingdom. You sit this throne for a few years, Patrick. When you've lived as long as I have, should you

be that fortunate, remember what you said here." Patrick appeared embarrassed as he realized he had overlooked the death of Pug's family in the war. Still, his temper got the best of him, and as Pug turned to walk away, Patrick's voice thundered, "I will not be addressed in that manner, magician! Duke or not, royal cousin or not, you will come back here and beg my pardon!"

Pug spun. Before he could speak, Arutha turned and stood directly'., "before his Prince. "Highness!" He put a restraining hand on Patrick's shoulder. In a whisper he said, "This brings nothing good! Calm yourself

and we'll revisit this tomorrow." Whispering, he added, "Patrick, your father will not be pleased at this." Before the Prince could speak, Arutha turned and said, "Grandfather.

If you and your lady would dine with me tonight, we can discuss exactly what sort of communication with the crown shall be undertaken." To the remaining courtiers in the hall, he said, "That will be all today. This court is adjourned."

He hustled Patrick through a door to the apartment set aside for him

wine. He signed and handed the chalice to Miranda handed him a goblet of

"The Prince?" asked Pug.

Arutha shrugged. "It's difficult. During the war he seemed content to follow Father and Uncle William's lead. The preparations for the city were underway by the time he arrived in Kronodor, and he simply agreed to whatever Father wanted.

"Now, he's out of his element. He is being asked to make decisions that would have taxed the wits of the best generals in this Kingdom's history." He sipped his wine. "Partly it's my fault."

Pug shook his head. "No, Patrick is responsible for his own actions."

"But Father would have—"

Pug interrupted. "You are not your father." He let out a slow sigh,

"No one is James. James was unique. As was Prince Arutha. The Western Realm may never again see men as able as them gathered together at one

time." Pug grew reflective. "It all began with Lord Borric. I have never

known a man his equal. Arutha was his equal in many ways, perhaps his superior in some, but on the whole, Borric raised two sons the Kingdom needed.

"But from there we are seeing a diminution of the line. King Borric was seasoned in his travels to Kesh, but nothing like his father the Prince."

Pug looked out a window at the distant torchlight along the palisades of

the castle. "Perhaps it's just the years passing, the ability to think back

with history's perspective, but at the time of the Riftwar there was a sense

in the West that eventually we should prevail. Now I realize that came

no matter how worthy they were. You must become the best man you are capable of. I know the war took as much a toll on you as it did me.

You alone of all those here know what I feel. Men like Owen Greylock and Erik von Darkmoor must rise to meet the needs of the nation." He smiled as he added, "You are more capable than you think. You will be a fine Duke of Krondor."

Arutha nodded. His mother, Gamina, was Pug's daughter by adoption, but he had loved and treasured her as much as he had his son, William. To lose them both within days of one another had been terrible.

"I know that it was worse for you, Grandfather. I mourn my parents. You mourn your children."

Pug said nothing, swallowing hard and gripping Miranda's hand.

Since the end of the war he had been revisited time and again by a wave

of profound sorrow and pain, and as much as he hoped for the sense of loss to pass, it didn't. It grew muted at times, even forgotten for hours at

a stretch, but in any quiet, reflective moment, it returned.

Even his marriage to Miranda had been hastily conducted, as if any delay might steal moments away from them. Pug and his new wife had spent as much time together as possible, dealing with the revelations of

their past lives and the need to discuss their future. Yet every moment

together, no matter how joyous, was overshadowed by the sense of loss,

the sense of work yet undone, and the sense that nothing could ever return

to them that which was lost.

Pug nodded at his grandson's words. He sighed. "Arutha, you an

be allowed to follow. Will you had you been told a man shall make
you are. So, again I say, you must step forward. Patrick may prove a
worthy ruler someday, but that day is not here yet. And it has often
been
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th
fat

our history that one in the role of advisor limited the choices
placed before
the rulers." Remembering the rule of mad King Roderic, Pug said,
"Perhaps
we could have used more of such men in the past."
Arutha said, "I'll try, Grandfather."
Miranda said, "I don't presume to advise, as I've never done well

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with obeying rulers in my day, but you'll have to do more than try
before
we're done."
Arutha looked as if he was ready to wilt. "I know."
A servant announced supper was ready, and they adjourned to the
next room. As Pug preceded his grandson, he knew one of the reasons
Arutha was so fatigued: from worry over the whereabouts of his own
sons.

Jimmy looked around. A series of patrols had been coming through
the area for the last two days. They had tried to enter the city and
discovered
that no one was being allowed through the established checkpoints.
Whoever was in charge inside Krondor, General Duko or someone
else, had decided that Kingdom infiltration was a serious threat and
had

A half dozen men lay dead, while others were moaning and nursing injuries as the strike force returned to the city, but order had been restored.

Most of the men outside the walls had come for booty, the opportunity to loot, or to gain steady pay, not to storm a well-fortified city. Jimmy had judged the city fairly easy to retake should Patrick and his

army be sitting outside the walls, but they weren't. They were in Darkmoor

en route, and by the time they reached Krondor, the fortifications would be reaching daunting proportions. Workers-freemen or prisoners, Jimmy didn't know which-were up each day at dawn, repairing the damage from the final assault on the city the previous summer.

He had chanced a leisurely ride past the main eastern gates, and saw that they had been successfully replaced. While not as grand as the originals,

the new gates looked stout and well crafted. Accomplished carpenters were among those working for the invaders, as most every man of fighting age on the distant continent of Novindus has been pressed into the army.

It was nearly sundown on their second day when Malar asked,

"Young sir, are we to find a safe place to sleep?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I think I've seen enough outside. It's time to go inside the city."

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"Forgive my ignorance, but if each gate and breach is manned in the fashion we have observed so far. how do you propose to do this thine."

prisoners
did likewise. Men crowded together on both sides, but he didn't
object;
the weather was still cold and his captors spared no fuel to keep the
slave
open heated. He wore only his undershirt and trousers. His boots,
jacket,
cloak, and all the other possessions he had carried were taken from
him.

He had managed to evade the patrol that had followed him and had
ridden to the edge of Krondor. There he had found a thriving
community
of traders, thieves, camp followers, and others assembled outside the
gates
of the city. The invaders had closed the city to anyone not among
their
own forces and an odd truce existed along the eastern wall.

With many breaches in the walls, the peace was kept by patrols riding
among those gathered outside the walls: a mix of Kingdom deserters,
displaced farmers, workers, and mercenaries looking for employment.
Among the invaders and Kingdom soldiers no small number of Keshians,
Quegans, and fighters from the Free Cities of Natal were in evidence.

Dash had made the mistake of attempting to sneak into Krondor. If
a man could enjoy freedom outside the walls, inside the walls only
those
who had served in General Duko's army were freemen. He had managed
to stay out of sight for a day, but had run into a patrol and while
being
chased had ducked into a seemingly empty building which in reality
had
housed a half-dozen armed soldiers who were off-watch. They held him
until the patrol caught up and, without even asking his reasons for
being

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he could barely understand them. His brother had the gift for language.

Dash could speak passable Keshian and Roldem, after having both languages

drilled into him as a boy in the King's court in Rillanon.

But he had barely been exposed to the Quegan, Natalese, and Yabonese dialects which, although descended from Keshian, were almost other languages to his ear. And this common tongue of Novindus was even more removed from Kesh than those.

Still, he was able to judge that something odd was happening or about to happen. The soldiers on patrol and those inside the city seemed as concerned about what was taking place to the north as they were concerned

about what might be coming from the east.

"Time to go," said a voice next to Dash.

Dash nodded to the man as he stood. The man was named Gustaf Tinker, though his last name suggested a grandfather's trade, for he had

been a mercenary soldier from the Vale of Dreams. Dash had found out the first night that most of the prisoners were hapless locals, townspeople,

fishermen, and farmers from nearby. Gustaf was something of an oddity,

as the Kingdom soldiers had been segregated from the other prisoners.

They didn't get worked, but they weren't executed either. Dash had no idea what General Duko thought he might do with them; use them for hostages, perhaps. But as a result of the segregation, Gustaf and perhaps

one or two others among the fifty or so men herded nightly into a room

tannery
in the North Quarter of the city. Most of the rank-smelling
businesses-slaughterhouses,
dyers, fish mongers, among others-were clustered here,
so the area provided two benefits to invaders: large relatively
undamaged
buildings, and a close proximity to an area of the wall which badly
needed
repair. In the East Quarter, Dash suspected the workers were being
housed
in ill abandoned stables and sheds.
The guard motioned and the first man in line moved out of the hall,
into the cold morning light. As Dash came out into the light, he
blinked,
and was startled to discover the almost ever-present cloud cover had
lifted (Yed inland. The day promised to be warm, which was a mixed
blessing.

Q
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During the day he barely felt the cold, given the amount of work he
was
required to do, but at least the next night might be more forgiving.
He followed along and waited until the boy who took care of food
and water appeared, and as anxious as his companions, he grabbed the
single slab of bread offered. It was a coarse and unappetizing meal;
the
grain was so W-ground that men had been known to break teeth on husks
or small pieces of gravel. The water ration had been cut with a small
amount of wine. Some men had come down with the belly flux a day or

it would continue to serve for a while.

Why was there so much urgency in the rebuilding of Krondor? For Duko to deny the city to Patrick made sense. For Duko to attempt to hold it for any length of time made little sense. Dash smelled a mystery,

and as much as he wanted to escape, he also wanted to discover what exactly was taking place around here before doing so.

A man grunted and the stone was lifted; quickly a net was pulled

under. Dash used the moment gained while the other men tied off the net

to the crane to turn to Gustaf and ask, "You anxious to stick around?"

The soldier, a quiet man of middle build, showed the slight smile which was his most dramatic expression, and said, "Of course. There's such an opportunity for advancement."

Dash said, "Yes. Another dozen deaths and you'll be first in line for bread and water in the morning."

"What do you have in mind?" whispered Gustaf.

Noticing they were being watched by Talwin, Dash said, "I'll tell you

later."

Gustaf nodded and made no comment as the crew moved over to repeat their labors with another large stone.

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Four

B

DASH FLINCHED.

The wind had turned cold again after the previous day's spring-like

which.
The guards shouted for the midday break, and the boys with the bread and watered wine hurried through the ranks, distributing their welcome fare. Dash sat down right where he worked, on the next large rock to be returned to the wall, while Gustaf sat with his back to the wall they were repairing. Dash took a bite and said, "Either I'm getting used to this or they've found a better baker."
Gustaf said, "You're getting used to it. Remember the old saying, 'Hunger is the best sauce.' "
Dash studied the warrior from the Vale of Dreams. At first it had seemed his entire conversational repertoire consisted of head nods, grunts, and the occasional "yes" or "no." But since last night he had opened up a little to Dash.
"How'd you get caught here?"
"I wasn't," said Gustaf, finishing his meager meal. He sipped his watery wine and said, "I was a guard on a caravan. . ." He glanced around. "It's a long story. The short of it is we were intercepted and

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captured by Duko's men and those of us who lived through the fight ended up here."
"How long has it been?"
"Too damn long." He frowned. "Must be a couple of months now. The days blur. It was snowing when I got here."

"Back to work!" shouted a guard, and the four men nearest Dash and Gustaf began moving the rock back into place in the wall.

Jimmy motioned with a slight tilt of his head. Malar nodded that he understood and signaled for the boy to come over. The urchin was filthy, covered from head to toe in soot and grime. He smelled as if he had been swimming in a cesspool, and Jimmy thought him a likely source of information.

Malar spoke with the boy for a few minutes, then gave him a coin, telling him to run off. He returned to where Jimmy leaned against the wall in a pose of indifference and said, "Young sir, the boy was, indeed, working in the sewers. They pay him to crawl into the smaller culverts and pipes, ridding them of burned wood, mud, and the like."

Jimmy shook his head slightly in irritation. "Damn. What are they doing down there?"

In a low voice, Malar said, "Apparently repairing the sewer, much as they seem to be repairing everything aboveground on the other side of the wall from all reports."

"But why?" asked Jimmy rhetorically. "The sewers are sufficient for his army. With a little work, he can keep them flowing enough so his men don't fall ill." Jimmy scratched an imaginary itch on the side of his

face. "But from what we've heard, he's trying to put them back to the state they were in before-" He had been about to say before

"Grandfather

blew up the city," but changed it to "the city was taken."

"Perhaps this General Duko likes things orderly."

than ideal when Patrick's army arrived.

Had he continued to rip Krondor apart, adding to the destruction to deny it to the Kingdom-would have made sense. But repairing damage done, as if he was going to occupy the city for a long time, it.

made no sense.

"Unless. . . " said Jimmy softly.

"Young sir?" asked Malar.

"Never mind." He looked around. "It's going to be dark in the next hour. Come with me."

He led Malar through the busy streets in the tent city and toward alley, really just a passage between freestanding walls, all that was left

two businesses. He ducked into the alley without waiting to see if he w

being watched, and heard Malar follow.

It would be easy to become lost in Krondor, Jimmy "ew from last visit. With all the destruction, landmarks didn't exist. Yet the patterns

were the same, and if one constantly remembered where one was relative

to one of the few intact recognizable features in the city, it should possible to find one's way. At least Jimmy hoped this was so.

He heard movement before he saw it, and ducked back, almost knocking Malar over. Someone walked along the abandoned street, coming closer. Jimmy and Malar hunkered down, fading into the darkness I between the walls.

Shortly, a pair of armed men hurried by, upon what errand Jimmy, Could only guess. Jimmy waited, to see if they returned or if others followed

. When no one else appeared after a few minutes, he moved across the road to a burned-out inn.

ing. He least that seems the general opinion.

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"I don't plan on being seen," said Jimmy. "You're free to make your own way from here on, if you choose."

"Living by my wits is an old habit of mine, young sir, but I suspect you and your brother are my best opportunity to find something beyond that." He studied Jimmy for a moment, as if weighing risks against possible

rewards, then said, "You and your brother are two men of some position, I suspect. If so, and if I serve you to a good ending, then perhaps

I may salvage something from what has so far been a horrible turn of fate." He fell silent for a moment again, then said, "If you will have me

use your service, I will go with you."

Jimmy half shrugged. "I guess that makes you my servant in fact, then. Tell you what you must do. Should anything happen to me, return as best you may to the East. Long before you reach the Kingdom Army you will almost certainly be apprehended by Kingdom advanced scouts. Probably Hadati hillmen or Krondorian Pathfinders. If it's Hadatis, see if

there's a man named Akee with them. If Pathfinders, ask for Captain Subati. Have either of those men take you to Owen Greylock or Eric von

Darkmoor and tell them everything you've seen so far. Without a name, you'll be taken for a Keshian deserter or looter or something, and it might

"Did she end up breaking your heart?"

Jimmy nodded with a smile now rueful. "That she did."

"You see. If you can anticipate, you can stay beyond harm's reach."

"You sound like a man of experience," suggested Jimmy.

Malar's eyes narrowed. "More than most men know, young sir."

Jimmy looked around. The shadows had deepened as the sun had lingered in the west, and now the sky above was turning a stunning shade of violet as night approached. "It's dark enough we won't be noticed, I'm thinking." He led Malar into the rear of the old inn, having to carefully pick his way across a section of timbers, what was left from a collapsed doorway and wall section, as well as part of the ceiling above. The roof

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was gone, and blackened timbers above showed starkly against the darkening sky. They moved cautiously, then Jimmy said, "It's around here somewhere."

He knelt and looked around. He moved some smaller debris covered in thick soot, raising a stench of wet charcoal. "Some of the wood is rotting. V ~

Malar said, "There is a ring of iron there, young sir."

"Give me a hand," said Jimmy as he cleared the top of the trapdoor.

As the two men pulled, Jimmy said, "This used to be the back room

They got the trap moved and swung it back, letting it fall. The opening yawned at them like a black pit. Jimmy said, "I wish we had some light."

"You expect to travel in such gloom?" said Malar, a note of incredulity in his voice.

"There is no light on the brightest day down there." He found what he was looking for, the ladder down, and as he swung himself down onto the topmost rung, he said, "There are lights down there if one but knows where to look."

"If you know where to look," Malar muttered under his breath. They carefully descended into the darkness.

Dash winced, but not from the cold; rather he flinched at the sound of a lash striking a man down below. He, Gustaf, Talwin, and a few other

men he had come to know were laboring atop the wall just to the north of Krondor's main gate. Dash glanced over at Gustaf, who nodded, indicating everything was all right. Suddenly they both turned. A man

screamed a few yards off as he lost his footing; in that brief instant, the man knew with dread certainty he was going to fall and no amount of will or prayer would keep him alive. His anguish and terror filled the

"Keep your wife about you," said Dash.

Dash chanced a look over the wall and saw the usual confusion of the foubourgh, soldiers milling around, street vendors, and the other human

flotsam drawn into this eddy of the previous year's war. Somewhere out there, he fervently wished, his brother Jimmy was getting the information

needed to alert Owen Greylock that something strange was taking place in Krondor.

General Duko was doing an admirable

Given the lack of resources,

job of restoring the city to its earlier status, at least from a military point

of view. The merchants and other residents of Krondor would see years pass before the city came close to returning to its former prosperity. Too

much damage had occurred for that to be anything but a distant dream.

But from a soldier's point of view, Krondor would be close to its previous

level of defensibility in less than a year's time, perhaps as quickly as nine

ev

or ten months.

Dash wished mightily he could get loose of this work gang, scout around, and find out what was going on, but the reality of the situation

was that any man who wasn't an invader was a slave. Whatever Dash's father had been thinking, it would have made more sense to have sent along one of the men who had traveled to Novindus with Erik von

Darkmoor,

someone who spoke the language and had a fair chance of passing for one of the men from the continent across the sea.

Even if he got free, Dash knew his only hope was to get beyond the

the aid of his bush-bruised knuckles on the hard stone and began putting mortar into place, he thought that his grandfather's ghost would be welcome about now. Certainly, if anyone could puzzle out what was happening in Krondor it would be the legendary Lord James.

Jimmy cursed in the darkness as he bruised his shins against an unexpected stone. "Is the young gentleman certain he hasn't lost his way?" came Malar's voice out of the blackness.

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Jimmy said, "Keep quiet. It's certain we're not the only ones down here. And yes I know where we are," he said. "We turn right and another dozen paces on the right should be the place we're looking for." As if to

prove the point, he turned to the right and moved into a small passage.

Malar kept both hands on the right wall as he awkwardly followed. After a few minutes they moved slowly through the gloom, then suddenly

Jimmy said, "We're here."

"Where is here, sir?" asked Malar.

"One of the many hiding places for. . ." A sound of rustling, as if something was being moved, came from where Jimmy stood. Then Malar shielded his eyes as a small spark was struck, blindingly bright after the

long time spent in the dark.

The torch was dry and caught at once, and Jimmy said, "Let's see what we have here." He rummaged through the contents of the hiding place, a false stone in the wall at waist height.

cache. "Observe." He patted each item as he named it. "A good length of rope. A large breaker bar. A water skin. A dagger, torches, or a lantern.)

P

"A lantern with a shutter would prove safer," said Malar.

"True," agreed Jimmy, "but as we don't have one, we must settle for what is at hand. There may be other caches still intact, and perhaps we

can find a lantern there."

He glanced around in the murk and said, "Gods!"

Malar said, "What?" concern obvious in his tone.

"Look at this mess."

"Sir, it's a sewer," replied Malar, irritation in his voice.

"I know that. But look at the walls and the water."

Malar saw then what Jimmy meant. While expecting moss-covered stones and brackish water, he didn't expect to see every surface covered

in soot. He glanced at his own hands and said, "Sir, I think we must bathe once we get above, else we shall surely be noticed."

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Jimmy glanced at his servant and said, "If I've scratched my chin as much as you, it is certain I look like a chimney sweep."

Malar said, "You're filthy, sir."

Jimmy said, "Well, no one said this would be easy."

As he set off, he heard Malar mutter, "No one said it would be impossible, either."

Dash nodded and Gustaf jumped. He landed behind the big stone they were attempting to move, and ducked out of sight of the guards.

He

do this with a tolerance of a mere fraction of an inch. With Dash's crew,

they were happy to get the stone within an inch of ideal tolerance.

The

only masons in Krondor were Duko's engineers, and there was a severe language problem with most of the workers.

Gustaf stepped around from behind the stone, nodding to Dash.

"Haul away," he shouted.

Dash stepped back as two men readied the ropes to be passed under the stone, and watched. The stone lifted two feet in the air, then

suddenly

tilted as a loud snap sounded. The strand Gustaf had cut had parted, and

now the stone hung a few feet off the ground, spinning slowly. The

two

with the support ropes backed away.

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"Get it down!" shouted a voice from below, and suddenly the rock was dropped.

"No!" said the foreman, too late, as men who should have slowly lowered the stone released the rope. Instead of settling quietly to the ledge,

the rock bounced a bit then teetered, as Dash had hoped, then slowly started to fall

"Look out!" cried a man near Dash as men started scrambling out of the way.

"Come on," Dash said to Gustaf as confusion erupted.

They hurried past a guard standing still in fascination as the rock slid

outward, overhanging the parapet, slowly moving to balance a moment in the air, then start its dramatic fall to the cobbles below.

Dash, Gustaf, and some other men hurried down a flight of stone

empty,
like these along the easternmost wall.
Dash had waited a week to find this one, an ideal exit from captivity
if he had judged correctly. Either there was a sewer entrance here,
or a
passage to another abandoned storage area that had one. The only
danger
would be if they were caught ducking into this room, or if the
passage to
the next room was blocked by fallen masonry. They would be missed at
the head count done each meal break and that was only an hour off.
In the gloom, it was difficult to find the entrance, but Dash
managed.
Below a heavy layer of ash and dust lay a wooden pallet, used to keep
grain off the damp stones. Below that was a man-sized hole, covered
with
a simple iron grate. Dash whispered, "Give me a hand," and two other
men stooped next to him.
In the faint light coming in through the broken wall, Dash could make
out the profiles of Gustaf and Talwin. Gustaf was what he appeared to
be, but Talwin had Dash concerned. Yet here he was risking broken
fingers
to get the grating up, without any hint of betrayal.
The grate came up and was moved out of the way. Dash started to
lower himself down, and said, "It's going to be difficult, dropping
into
the dark, but you should hit water about seven, eight feet below you,
so
expect that. Face the same way I am and move to your right. You won't
see a thing, but I know my way around down there."
He let go, which was among the most courageous acts of his life, as
every fiber of his being screamed to hang onto the stone and not fall
into

in the sewer only to later sicken and die from it. He quickly stepped to his right, and a moment later another man fell through the hole into the darkness. "Here," said Dash, and the man moved toward him in the blackness. Then two other men came through, and Dash said, "Who's here?"

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"Gustaf," said the second man down.

"Talwin," said the next voice.

"Reese," said the third, and Dash remembered the tall quiet man with whom Talwin spoke from time to time. "I saw you three move and took the moment. No sense standing around like sheep."

Dash doubted that; he was certain Talwin had alerted Reese something was afoot, but he didn't care to debate that now. "Good," he said aloud. "We can use all the help we can getting,, out of here."

"Now what?" said Gustaf. "We're in the darkest pit I've seen and the foulest smelling, and what are we to do next?"

Dash said, "This is part of the old sewer under the wall. If we keep moving back toward the city center, we'll find a way out of Krondor."

"Why not just move away from the city if we're under the wall?" asked Reese.

,,Because this"-Dash's hand struck the stone next to which he stood-"is the outer limit of the sewer. To get on the other side of the

wall you better be able to chew rock."

,,Damn," said Gustaf. "I thought we'd slip out under the wall or something when you told me of the sewers."

"They never connected the sewer in the foubourgh with the inner city. It would make it too easy for an invader to slip in." Dash muttered,

"Talwin, do the same to Gustaf, and Reese bring up the rear. Listen for my instructions." Dash put his right hand on the wall and said, "Let's go, slowly. And if you lose your grip, sing out." They moved off into the gloom.

Jimmy turned suddenly and put his hand over Malar's mouth as he let the torch fall to the stone walkway next to the sewer. As he hoped, the torch began to fail and flicker, allowing Jimmy to step on it, putting out the light. Malar had the presence of mind not to be too shocked by the move, and he endured standing there with Jimmy's hand over his mouth. When Jimmy removed it, Malar heard what Jimmy had, men moving

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cautiously down another tunnel, nearby. Whispering as quietly as possible, Jimmy said, "Someone's coming." Malar nodded.

They stood motionless, listening to the faint sound of men moving slowly. Then one spoke. His voice was muffled and distant and nothing of what was said came through, but Jimmy would have bet a purse of gold they were invaders on patrol. Something about the quality of the speech hinted at an accent. They waited until the sound died out, as the strangers moved away.

we're either dead men or prisoners, and I'd rather take my chances retracing our route back to the other side of the wall than those two choices."

"Agreed, yet your words fill me with little confidence, young sir." Jimmy said nothing, but glanced around the corner, making sure that no one had quietly snuck up on them. "This way," he said, leading Malar toward a large yawning tunnel entrance that opened up across from where they stood. This required them to step down into the filthy water. They slogged through the slowly moving mass of floating char, and less savory debris, and entered the blackness.

Dash felt fingers dig into his shoulder as the sound of men echoed from a distance. In the blackness they couldn't tell from which quarter the sound originated. Nerves were frayed and Dash was concerned one of the three men would panic. Gustaf seemed solid, if nervous, Talwin was quiet, but Reese was given to blurting out pointless things, either questioning how much farther they'd have to move in the gloom, or expressing his apprehensions.

There were places along the way where light came down from above, faint cracks in the street above, or a broken culvert admitting some illumination.

Dash was always surprised how bright these areas looked after COMPLETE darkness, but knew it was an illusion. He could only see a dozen

couldn't
find it. Not the least bit immodest, Dash knew it wasn't there, for
if it
had been, he would have found it.

The second location was already empty. Someone had emptied it.
Dash didn't know if it had been stripped of its contents during the
fall of
the city or days, even hours before he reached it.

He was leading the men northward as much as he could, knowing his
best chance for escape was around the area formerly known as
Fishtown.

it was one of the few places in Krondor you could enter the bay and
with
a little swimming find yourself outside the walls of the city. Dash
didn't
know if the other men could swim, and for the most part he didn't
care.

While he wanted to see these three men to safety if possible, he'd
willingly
sell them out to get his information back to the Prince.
Keeping one hand on the wall, he led them deeper into the darkness.

Jimmy motioned toward the faint light. Malar nodded, whispering,
"A way out, young sir.

"Perhaps. Boost me up on your shoulders so I can take a look."

Malar knelt, and when Jimmy put his left boot on the servant's
shoulders,

Malar stood, grabbing Jimmy's ankles to support him as he was lifted
to a point just below the light. Jimmy fought for balance a moment,
but

Malar kept his motion steady, and Jimmy kept his position as he
grabbed

a support in the floor above him to keep from falling.

mistaken, one
isn't too far from here. Pray to whatever gods you worship that the
top
of the steps is unblocked."
Malar muttered an almost silent benediction and followed behind
Jimmy.

Dash heard something ahead of him in the dark and whisper
"Don't move!"

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The men behind him stopped their forward motion as sounds around

them echoed. "What is-" began Talwin.

He never finished as Reese struck him from behind, knocking him
from his feet. "Here!" he shouted.

Suddenly men were swarming in the dark and lanterns uncovered,
blinding Dash momentarily. He blinked trying to see beyond the
brilliant
lights, but could only see dark shapes hurrying toward him. Thinking
of
nothing else to do, he leaped forward, trying to dodge between two of
the

shapes. One man lunged at him, missing, while the other was slow in
turning, with Dash past him before he could be intercepted.

Dash slogged as quickly through the knee-deep water as he could, and
behind a pair of lanterns he saw movement. Dodging to his right, he
rushed to another potential exit as arms grabbed him from behind,
dragging
him down into the water.

against the floor behind him. He hurried up into the dark room as a cloud of soot exploded into the air from the trap. Malar sneezed as he came up. The room was the back storage area of a tannery near the river to the north of the city, and it had taken Jimmy most of the day and into the evening to discover it.

The roof of the building was gone, probably accounting for its being abandoned, as the nights would still be cold. Jimmy looked around and saw* lights in a few buildings nearby, but nothing close by. Malar could be seen in the faint light inside the building. "If I'm as dirty as you, we'd better stay out of sight."

"Good advice, young sir," agreed the servant. "You are dirtier than a coal seller. One glance at us, and any fool could tell we had been somewhere we should not be."

A sound caused Jimmy to hold up his hand. "What-" At once he pulled his sword, as men came swarming into the room, over the burned-out wall and through the single door. Only a fool would fight, as more than a dozen swords were leveled in their direction. Jimmy

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made a clear gesture of letting the sword fall from his hand as he stepped back.

Hands roughly grabbed him and tied his arms behind, while two men did the same to Malar. They all wore rough fighting garb, leather, and

It was a roughly twelve-by-twelve-foot room, with a single door
barred
from the other side. He felt up and down both edges, but all hinges
and
locks were on the other side. He was inside until someone released
him.
From the stench, several rodents had recently died in the room. Had
he
eaten in the last two days, he probably would have added to the mess,
but his captors would have to be satisfied with subjecting him to a
fit of
the dry heaves.
After several painful minutes of gagging, he had managed to overcome
the impulse. Now, about two hours later, he judged, he barely noticed
the
odor unless he thought about it.
Mostly he was attempting to chart his best possible course. That he
was in this dark room rather than being hauled before one of General
Duko's officers suggested to Dash that he was a prisoner of someone
besides the invaders. The first possibility to occur to him was that
he had
been captured by Kingdom soldiers, hiding from the invaders. If so,
he
could quickly identify himself and recruit them.
More likely, he was in the clutches of outlaws, and in that case, he
would have to bargain. His companions were missing, probably locked
away in a similar room somewhere nearby.
Suddenly light shone around the edges of the door and he could hear
footfalls approaching. As bright as the light seemed through the
cracks,
when the door was opened, it blinded him. A voice from without said,
"You awake?"
"Yes," said Dash, finding his voice was harsh from dryness. "Any

inn or hotel, and he had been locked in a storage closet. There were ample signs of life in the building, for crates and bales of goods were stacked around the room.

A half dozen men surrounded him, none with weapons evident. It was obvious they felt confident enough that they could keep him from escaping. As he blinked against the light from the lantern, he noticed that one man did hold a large billy, and he was sure he would use it if Dash made any sign of attempting to flee.

"What now?" said Dash.

"Come along," said the man with a lumpy visage.

Dash said nothing and followed, walking behind two men, with two more guarding the rear. The last man stayed in the storage room, for what reason Dash could only imagine.

Dash was led down a long dark tunnel, one with a lantern at each end, featureless and damp. He listened, but only heard the sound of boot leather and nails on stone. If they were close to the city streets above, those streets were deserted.

The man in front pushed open a door, allowing the others to enter a very large room. It had a dozen torches guttering in sconces. A

wooden table, not too badly charred, had been hauled down from the destroyed tavern aboveground and now served as the site of what Dash took to be some sort of court or tribunal.

At the head of the long table sat an old man. He looked deformed,

her fashion-dressed like a man and armed to the teeth; he saw a sword, daggers in belt and boots, and he was certain she had more weapons secreted on her, such being the practice of thieves. She wore a dirty white shirt, now almost charcoal color, a leather vest, men's riding breeches, and a red scarf tied around her head. Dark hair fell from under the scarf, and down her back.

With a surprisingly deep voice, she said, "You stand accused."
Dash summoned as much confidence as he could manage in such

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circumstances and said, "No doubt."

The lumpy-faced man said, "Before you're convicted, have you anything to say in your defense?"

Dash shrugged. "Would it do any good?"

The old man chuckled and the man who had first apprehended Dash glanced his way. "Probably not," he said, "but it won't hurt."

"May I first inquire of what crime I'm being accused?"

The lumpy-faced man again glanced at the old man, who waved a curt gesture of permission. "You stand accused of trespass. You were found someplace you were not given permission to pass."

Dash blew out a long breath. "So that's it, then. Mockers."

The young woman glanced at the old man, who motioned with his good hand for her to come close. He whispered in her ear, and she said,

"0 you us ves, py"

Because smugglers would have cut my throat and been on their way, and Duko's guards would have had me under questioning up there." He pointed upward. "You've separated me from my companions, which

Several people spoke at once, and the old man signaled for silence. The young woman leaned over and then repeated his words. "Your name?))

"Dashel Jamison. My father is Arutha, Duke of Krondor."

Without waiting, the girl said, "So you've come spying for the King."

Dash attempted a grin. "Well, the Prince, actually. But yes, I'm here to scout out Duko's defenses, so that Patrick can retake Krondor."

The old man waved a badly burned hand and spoke to the woman,

who said, "Come closer, Puppy."

Dash did as he was told and came to stand before the old man and the young woman. The old man's one good eye studied Dash's face for a long moment as the woman held a lantern close to it, so every detail

could be seen.

Finally, the old man spoke loud enough for all to hear. "Leave us."

His voice sounded close to ruined, dry gravel being scraped, a

strangled

sound.

Everyone but the woman did, instantly and without hesitation, and

the old man said, "Well, then. It is a small world, boy."

Dash leaned over to study the burned features before him and he said,

"Do I know you, sir?"

"No," said the old man slowly, as if every word hurt. "But I know you by name and lineage, Dashel, son of Arutha."

"Am I to know your name, sir?"

The woman glanced at the old man, but his one good eye stayed

fastened upon Dash. "I'm your great-uncle, boy, that's who I am. I'm

the

Upright Man."

Fire

seen so much just a month before.

Arutha looked at Pug and said, "You needed to see me

"We have a problem."

Arutha nodded. "We have many. Which particular one are we discussing?"

"

Patrick."

Arutha stood and moved around the table to the door and glanced through. A pair of clerks outside were hunched over documents, reviewing

reports and requests for supplies, lost in their work.

Arutha closed the door. He returned to his seat and said, "What do YOU propose?"

"I propose you send a message to the King."

"And?" Arutha looked directly into the magician's eyes.

"I think we need another commander in the West."

Arutha sighed, and in that moment Pug could hear the fatigue, stress, worry, and doubt in the man, expressed in as eloquent a fashion as if an

orator had spoken for an hour. Pug instantly knew the outcome of this discussion before Arutha said another word. Yet he allowed the Duke to

continue. "History teaches us that we often do not get the best men for a

particular job. It also teaches us that if the rest of us do ours, we'll somehow manage."

Pug leaned forward and said, "We are this close"-he held forefinger and thumb apart a scant portion of an inch-"to war with Great Kesh. Don't you think it proper to finish the one we have before we start an

other?"

thoughts,

then said, "And that means you hardly know me."

"You were raised on the other side of the Kingdom, Arutha. We saw each other from time to time . . ."

Arutha said, "It's difficult growing up surrounded on all sides by legends.

Did you know that?"

Pug shrugged. "I am not sure."

Arutha said, "My father was 'Jimmy the Hand,' the thief who became the most powerful noble in the Kingdom. I was named for the man who is almost unarguably the most brilliant ruler the Western Realm has known.

"The King and I have discussed what it's like to be the sons of such men, on several occasions." He pointed his finger at the magician and said, "And you . . . you look like my son. You look younger now than You did when I was a child. You're turning into a figure of mystery and

fear, Grandfather. 'Pug, the Eternal Sorcerer!' The man who saved us during the Riftwar."

Arutha stopped, weighed his words, and said, "Borric, before he became

King, once told me that our roles would be far different than our fathers'. Arutha had been thrust into command in Crydee, a situation demanding action without hesitation, without doubt.

"Father was the brash boy who saved Arutha, then became his most trusted adviser and friend. Between the two of them there was always an

answer.

Pug laughed, and it wasn't a mocking laugh. "I'm sure they would argue they had their share of doubts and mistakes, Arutha."

"Perhaps, but the results were there. As a child I grew up hearing the

youth." He looked at Pug. "I wasn't a noble reading dry reports, but
a
boy hearing tales from his father."

Pug said "What are you telling me? That you don't feel equal to the

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task?"

"No man can be equal to the task of putting the Kingdom right,
Grandfather." He narrowed his gaze. "Not even you."

Pug took a deep breath, then relaxed. "So Patrick won't give up
Stardock?"

"

He wants it all back, Grandfather. He wants this city rebuilt in his
lifetime to a glory beyond what it was before. He wants Kesh
completely

out of the vale. He wants the Bitter Sea cleared of Quegan raiders
and

Keshian pirates, and when Borric finally dies, Patrick wants to go to
Rillanon

to take the Crown, to be known as the greatest Prince in the history
of the West."

Softly Pug said, "Save us from monarchs with vanity."

"Not vanity, Pug. Fear."

Pug nodded. "Young men often fear failure."

"I understand his fear," said Arutha. "Maybe if I had been given a
different name, George or Harry, Jack or Robert, but no; I was named
for the man Father admired above all others."

"Prince Arutha was a very admirable man. Of all the men I've known,

He leaned over the desk and said, "But know this: you are able. And as long as you're my grandson, I will not let you forget that. The boys are MY great-grandsons. Gamina may not have been the daughter of my body, but she was the daughter of my heart, and I love all her children and grandchildren none the less for this." He reached across the table and put

his hand on Arutha's shoulder. "Especially you." Moisture came unbidden to Arutha's eyes. "Me?" Softly Pug said, "You may not be as much like your father as you would wish, but you are more like your mother than you'll ever know." He removed his hand and turned to go. "I'll leave you. Rest, and dine with me tonight when you've had a chance to refresh yourself." He reached the door and said, "Try not to worry too much about the boys. I am sure they are safe."

He opened the door and left, closing it behind him. Arutha, Duke of Krondor, sat silently and thought about what his grandfather had just said to him. At last he allowed himself the luxury of a long sigh, then turned to the work still before him. Perhaps he would take the opportunity to rest a bit before supper that evening. And as he regarded the report on top of the pile, he thought, The boys are able. Grandfather is most likely right, and the boys are safe.

Jimmy's head snapped backward as the soldier stepped through the blow. Jimmy's eyes watered from the pain and his vision turned red for

mercenary
from the East, and this is my dog robber. I'm looking for work."
"Wrong answer," said the man, and he struck Jimmy again. Jimmy
Collapsed, unable to make his legs obey, and was held entirely by the
two
soldiers.
Jimmy spat blood, and through rapidly swelling lips said, "What do
you want me to say?"
'Every mercenary outside the walls has been told to stay out of
Kronдор.
If you were a freebooter you would know this." He nodded and the
two men moved to the wall, and let jimmy slump to the floor. The man
knelt, putting his own face down near Jimmy)S.
The soldier was a brutish-looking fellow, with a beetle brow and
thick
black hair that hung down over his shoulders. He sported a short
black
beard, and at this close quarter, Jimmy could see he bore an
assortment
of scars on his neck and shoulders. The man grabbed Jimmy's hair and
said, "Either you're a fool or you're a spy. Which is it?"
Jimmy paused for dramatic effect, then slowly he said, "I came
looking
for my brother."
The soldier stood and motioned and the two other soldiers picked
Jimmy up and moved him to a chair. They were gathered in a large
bedroom of an inn, converted to a cell of sorts.
Jimmy and Malar had been dragged there the night before and the
interrogation had started at once. For an hour they had been
routinely
questioned and beaten, then left alone. Just as they were able to
relax, the
door would open and the questioning would begin again. Jimmy knew

One fear of his was that they already had Dash in custody. If so, the admission he was searching for his brother might dovetail into Dash's arrest if he was already here. In a way, it was the truth, and being the truth, it would prove far more convincing than the most artfully concocted lie.

"Your brother?" said the man, holding a fist cocked to deliver another blow. "What brother?"

"My younger brother." Jimmy leaned back in the chair, letting his left arm hang over the chair back, keeping him upright. "We were jumped

a few miles from the city by bandits and rode toward Krondor." He paused for a long moment, then as the interrogator started to menace him

with his fist, he blurted, "We got separated. The bandits chased him, so

we doubled back and followed after. We dodged the bandits, as they came

back our way, so we know they didn't have him—couldn't see any leading

his horse, and it was a good horse so they'd have kept it." He swallowed.

"Can I have some water?" he croaked.

The man in charge nodded and one of the guards stepped out of the

room and returned a moment later with water. Jimmy drank eagerly, then

nodded toward Malar. The man who had been questioning Jimmy nodded and the servant was given a cup of water to drink.

"Go on," instructed the interrogator.

Jimmy looked at the boots. He didn't need to pick them up. They were identical to Dash's: the same bootmaker in Rillanon had made them

for the brothers. Jimmy said, "In the left one you'll see the mark of the

bootmaker, a small bull's head."

The man nodded. "I've seen it."

"Is my brother alive?"

The man nodded. "At least he was until two days ago. That's when he escaped."

Jimmy couldn't help but smile. "Escaped?"

"With three others." The man studied Jimmy a moment, then said,

"Bring them." He turned and walked out of the room; Jimmy and Malar were hurried after him, a guard on each side.

They were taken to what had been the common room of the inn, and

Jim *my finally recognized where he was. He was in what was left of a very palatial inn called the Seven Gems, not too far from the heart of the

Merchants' Quarters. He was a few blocks from Barret's Coffee House, where most of the major financial business of the Western Realm had been conducted. Glancing around the room, Jimmy decided the inn had survived relatively intact. There was ample smoke damage and all of the

tapestries that had decorated the place were gone, but the furniture was

intact, and the rooms still able to be locked. He had been questioned in

one of the back storage rooms, near the kitchen, and was now being led

into the far corner of the commons, where a curtain separated a large booth from the rest of the room.

Sitting in the booth was a trio of men, all clearly military from their

dress and manner. The man in the center was looking over a parchment,

"Your name?" asked the man in the school.

"I'm called Jimmy," he answered.

"Jimmy," repeated the man, as if testing the sound of the name. He studied Jimmy's face, and Jimmy studied his.

He was a middle-aged man, probably in his late forties or early fifties.

He still looked fit, though what once had been hard muscle had been thinned by hardships on campaign and a cold, hungry winter. He had the

look of a fighter, from his greying dark hair tied back to keep it from his

brown eyes, to the hard set of a jaw kept clean-shaven. Something about

him looked familiar to Jimmy, and suddenly it struck him: in manner and

voice the man resembled what he remembered of Prince Arutha from Jimmy's childhood. There was a no-nonsense hardness to him, a calculating

intelligence that would be fatal to underestimate.

The man said, "You are a spy, of that I am almost certain." He spoke the King's Tongue, but his accent was slight.

Jimmy said nothing.

"But the issue here is are you a bad spy or a terribly clever one."

He

sighed, as if thinking on this. "Your brother, if that is really who he is,

was a far better spy than I had thought. I had him under observation, yet

he managed to escape. We knew of the sewers under the walls, yet didn't

know of that particular entrance. Once he was in there, he was gone."

The soldier looked at Jimmy, as if measuring him, then said, "I won't make that mistake again." He reached for a mug nearby and drank what

not, in
fact, common mercenaries?"
"Not unreasonable at all," said Jimmy. The man speaking to him
motioned to one of his two companions, who left the booth,
fettchheendsoavide,r
a chair, and allowed Jimmy to sit. Jimmy nodded his thanks,
"Would it be immodest to claim we are uncommon mercenaries?"
"Not in the least," said the man. "Though it would smack of
insincerity.

Jimmy said, "I am at your mercy. If I'm a spy or not
You can kill me at your whim." is of little matter.
"True, but murder holds little appeal for me. I've seen far too much
of it over the last twenty years." He motioned to the remaining man
who
sat at his side, and the man rose from his seat and offered Jimmy a
mug

of water. "I'm sorry we don't have anything more flavorful, but at
least
it's clean. One of the major wells to the north has been cleared and
is
running fresh again. Your Duke James left nothing behind that
provides
much comfort."

Jimmy feigned indifference to hearing his grandfather's name. This

invader was very well informed about things in Krondor and the
Kingdom
to know about Duke James and Rillanon's better bootmaker.
"But we manage," said the man. "Feeding the workers is difficult,

Jimmy followed the man out of the door of the inn. Outside the
afternoon
sun was brilliant and Jimmy squinted. "We must walk, I'm sorry
to say. Horses are a staple of our current diet." He glanced at
Jimmy.

"Though a few are maintained to carry messages."
They walked along a busy street. While almost every man was armed

and obviously a warrior, a few were workers and a few women were seen
here and there. Everyone seemed occupied with some task, and none of

the usual idle habitues of the city were in evidence: the drunks,
prostitutes,
confidence men, and beggars. Also noticeable by their absence, the
street

urchins who flocked in rowdy ga s thr
ters of the city.

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If I may ask," said Jimmy, "where's my dog robber?"
"He's comfortable," said the man. "Don't worry about him."

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

The man who was walking beside him said, "jimmy, if you are a spy,
you're most likely wondering what it is we're doing here in Krondor."
Jimmy said, "It is a question that has crossed my mind. I may not be

amused. "Good observation. Yes, we're not planning on leaving anytime soon."

Jimmy nodded, his head still ringing from the beating he had taken. He said, "But you're turning away swords who will help you hang on to this place when the Prince's army returns."

"How many spies are among that band outside?" asked the man.

"I couldn't begin to guess." Jimmy shrugged. "Not many, I wager."
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"Because no man of the Kingdom can pass himself off as one of your own. We don't speak your language.?)

"Ah," said the officer, "but you have. Some of your countrymen have been among us for years. We first became aware of a group calling itself 'Calis's Crimson Eagles' before the fall of Maharta. We now know

they were Kingdom agents. We know they were with us from time to time." They reached the walls and the man motioned for Jimmy to climb with him up a flight of stairs to the ramparts.

As they climbed, the man continued. "We who were commanding never had a clear picture of this campaign. To understand what we became,

you need to know what we were before." They reached the ramparts and the man motioned for Jimmy to follow.

They reached a section of the wall freshly refurbished, the stones set firmly in place with new mortar. The man motioned beyond the wall, toward the east. "Out there is a nation, your Kingdom." He turned to regard Jimmy. "In my homeland we have no such nations. There were city-states, ruled by men who were petty or noble, who were acquisitive or generous, wise or foolish.

prisoners who could teach me, men and women of some education
oexperience, who would help me understand this concept of this
Kingdom."

He shook his head. "It is a grand thing, this nation of yours."

Jimmy shrugged. "We tend to take it for granted."

"I understand, for you have never known otherwise." The man looked
out over the wall. Below was a sea of tents and makeshift shelters,
campfires

and the sounds of humanity, laughter, shouts of anger, the voices of
peddlers, a child crying. "But to me the notion of something larger
than

what I can take and hold-for my employer or for myself-that is a
wondrous
notion."

The wind blew and the afternoon smelled of salt and charcoal. The
man said, "Tell me, why is this city built here?" He glanced
westward.

"If there is a worse harbor in the world, I've not seen it."

Jimmy shrugged. "The story says the first Prince of Krondor liked the
view of the sunset from the hill upon which the palace was built."

"Princes," said the man, shaking his head. He sighed loudly. "We
are dredging that terrible harbor. We have found those who call
themselves '

Wreckers' and they are using their magic to raise hulks for us. We
manage one every three days, and will have the harbor cleared before
next

winter."

Jimmy said nothing.

"We know you marshal what's left of your fleet down in Shandon
Bay, in the village you call Port Vykor. We have no fleet, but we
will

have ships, and we will hold the city."

Jimmy shrugged. "May I ask why?"

with no sense of the future. One day is much like the next."
He turned toward Jimmy and studied him a long time. "I'm fifty-two
years old next Midsummer's Day, lad. I've been a soldier since I was
sixteen years of age. For thirty-six years I've been fighting." He
glanced
at the city as the sun began to lower in the west. "That's a damn
long
time to be dealing in blood and slaughter." He leaned on the parapet
as
if tired. "For the last twenty I've served demons or black gods, I
don't
know which, but I know that the Army of the Emerald Queen was made
up of men beguiled by dark forces, lured by promises of wealth, power
and immortality." His voice lowered. "Or propelled by fear." He
looked,
down, as if reluctant to look Jimmy in the eyes. "I was ambitious
when
I was young. I was anxious to make a name for myself. I formed my own
company when I was eighteen. I was commanding a thousand men by
twenty.
"At first I was glad to serve the Emerald Queen. Her army was the
greatest my land had known. With conquest came booty, gold, women,
more recruits." He closed his eyes as if remembering. "But after a
while
the years slip by and you find the string of women hold no interest,
and
there's only so much gold you can carry with you. Besides, there's
nothing
to do with it but hire more men."
He looked at Jimmy and pointed with his thumb over his shoulder,
to the north. "My old friend Nordan is up there, at my back. If I
know

speaking again to Jimmy, he said, "Meanwhile, Fadawah is going to take your city of LaMut. He won't go on to Yabon this year, being content

to throw up a position south of that city and starve it for a year.

He has the means to keep reinforcements and supplies from reaching the city while he repulses your forces from the south."

Jimmy said, "'y are you telling me this?"

"Spy or not, I want you to carry a message for me to the Prince. I believe he's still in Darkmoor, but have no doubt he has forces no more

than a day's ride to the east. I'll arrange an escort to a likely point and turn you loose."

"Why not just send a message

"Because I think you are a spy and I think you're likely to be believed.

If I send one of my own men, or a captive who wasn't known to the Prince or his men, I think it might take too long to convince him of my

intent. And time is a commodity neither of us has."

Jimmy said, "You're General Duko."

The man nodded. "And I've been sent out by one of my oldest comrades to die. Fadawah and I have served in various campaigns together

since we were hardly old enough to shave. But he fears me, and that's my death warrant."

"What do you want me to say to Prince Patrick?"

"I have an offer for him."

"what's the offer?"

"I wish to negotiate a settlement of our differences."

"You're willing to surrender?"

"Nothing that simple, I'm afraid." The General smiled a half-smile

...that as you wish me to tell the Prince's men.

"Tell them that I have handpicked the men with me here in Krondor.

Tell them those I had reservations about were left behind with Noradan.

I can vouch for my men." He looked into Jimmy's eyes a moment. "Tell your Prince of Krondor I will swear fealty to the crown, in exchange for

land and tides. Grant me estates and income, and I will lead the army north to visit with my old friends Noradan and Fadawah."

Jimmy was silent for a moment. He was both astonished at the suggestion

and amazed at the logic behind it. He shook his head. "I don't know what he will say."

"If we knew what he would say, we wouldn't have to send you, now, would we?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Come, get something to eat, and leave at first light." He led Jimmy down the stairs.

Jimmy watched the man's back and considered what he wanted. In a single breath he had set a price: forgive the assault on the Western Realm,

and more, grant the man a patent of nobility, name him Earl or Baron of

some lands in the West, and give him the power to rule over those lands.

Jimmy shook his head. Would Patrick do it, or would his temper doom men on both sides of the wall to more useless bloodshed?

Dash sipped at the watery soup and said, "So then what?"

"We stayed in that basement a week or more. Hard to judge being in the gloom all that time." The old man motioned to put aside his bowl, held in a badly deformed hand, and the young woman moved to take it before it fell to the floor. "Thank you, Trina," he said.

ly, in my life I surely know which one is truly mine.

"Lysle, you were telling me about Grandfather and Grandmother."

"James set fire to the oil he rigged in the sewers. We knew it would be a close thing and it was. I was in the escape tunnel ahead of them and when the explosion came I shot from the mouth of the tunnel like a

cork from a bottle of sparkling wine. I was badly burned, as you see, and

had half my bones broken, but I'm a tough nut."

The woman named Trina spoke. "And we found a healing priest who worked on him."

"Damn near killed the man, making him do his healings over me, MY merry band of cutthroats did. But they saved me before the poor brother

of Killian passed out from exhaustion. He squeezed a few years more of

life for me, while I set matters in Krondor right."

"Grandfather and Grandmother?"

The old man shook his head. "James and Gamina were last in the tunnel, behind me. They never had a chance, boy."

Dash had known his grandfather and grandmother were dead; his great-grandfather Pug had said so, but upon finding the Upright Man alive, a faint hope had been rekindled in Dash. Now it was extinguished

again, and the pain was again felt.

Lysle said, "If it is any comfort, I know they died quickly, and together "

Dash nodded. "Grandmother would never have wanted to live without Grandfather. "

"I never knew my brother well, Dash. We had met once as young men, and then again a few years ago." The old man laughed, a dry

in

power and the time he spent ruling in Rillanon.

"I had thought myself something of a man of some accomplishments.

When my father had died, one of his most trusted lieutenants had

seized control of the Mockers, naming himself the Virtuous Man. I in turn deposed

him and called myself the Sagacious Man. And I returned to the name Upright Man to signal an agreement I had with your grandfather and create the false impression I had deposed myself with the members of the Mockers.

"But my accomplishments pale next to those of Jimmy the Hand. The thief who ruled in turn the two mightiest cities in the Kingdom. He who

was the most powerful noble in the nation. What a man he was."

Dash nodded. "When you put it that way, I see what you mean. To me he was Grandfather, and he had lots of wonderful stories. I sometimes

forgot they were true."

The Upright Man said, "Now, the question is, what to do with you?"

t'Me?'

"You're here spying for your father. That's not a problem, in and of itself, but the fact is you've seen me, talked to me, and letting you go is

a problem."

"Would it make a difference if I swore to say nothing about you to anyone?"

The old man laughed his dry chuckle again. "Hardly. You're who you are, boy, and things might remain on the square between us for a while, but eventually, when things return to something like before around

here, the day will come when some Mocker will create a problem that

...and then there's the small matter that we don't presently control
Kronador.

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"That's a matter of some weight, true. And it gives me pause about
ordering your death. You don't presently pose a threat. What do you
think

You can manage for us if we help you get free and back to your
father?"

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Raymond E. 'Peist

Dash said, "I can't promise anything. I don't have the authority. But
I suspect with a little conversation, I can get Father to authorize a
general

pardon for any of your people who help us retake the city."

"A little fighting for an amnesty?"

"Something like that. Having a few of you inside the walls at key
locations at the right time could save a lot of lives under the
walls."

"Well, let me think on this, and then I'll tell you what I'll do
tomorrow.

Get some rest and don't try to escape."

"what of my friends?"

"They're being cared for. I don't know how important they are to
you, but I'm counting on them having a little call on your loyalties,
so I

can keep you in line."

Dash nodded and the old man hobbled to the door. "Trina will keep
you company for the night." Dash tried to look pleased, but the
woman's

Sighing, Dash lay down and closed his eyes.

six

Nakor FROWNED.

He scanned the room of the warehouse in Darkmoor he was currently using as a base of operations, and said, "This will not do."

Sho Pi, his first disciple, said, "What, master?"

Since becoming self-appointed head of the Church of Arch-Indar, Nakor had ceased objecting to being referred to as "master" by the young former monk of Dala. Nakor pointed to the wagon that was being unloaded

outside his new "church," and said, "We ordered twice that."

"I know," shouted the driver of the second wagon-as it pulled up.

"Hello, Nakor. "

"Hello, Roo! " shouted the former gambler turned high priest. "Where is the rest of our grain?"

"This is all there is, my friend," said Rupert Avery, once the richest

man in the history of the Western Realm, now the proud owner of three wagons, three teams of horses, and an amazing debt owed him by a near-bankrupt

Kingdom. "Most of what I can buy goes to the Prince, to feed

the soldiers. "

"But I have gold," said Nakor.

"For which I am eternally grateful, for without your patronage, I would be unable to buy even the meanest grain out there. My credit is

a
great deal about my children." His smile faded and he said, "About
myself,
as well."
"Learning about one's self is always a good thing," observed Nakor.
"After you unload, come inside and I'll make us some tea."
"You have tea?" asked Roo. "Where did you get it?"
"A gift from a woman who had hidden it from before the war. It is
not very fresh, I'm afraid, but it is tea."
"Good, I'll join you when I'm done here."
Nakor went inside the building, where another disciple was overseeing
a class of students, five this time, listening to the introductory
lesson on
the role of good in the universe. Nakor realized that most, if not
all, were
there for the meager food his church provided after the lecture, but
he was
always hopeful someone would answer the call. So far he had recruited
five new students, for a total of six counting Sho Pi. Given he had
unilaterally
decided to create a church for one of the four greatest Gods in
the Midkemian universe, it was a very modest beginning.
"Any questions?" asked the disciple, who had himself heard the
lecture
for the first time only a few weeks before.
Four of the students looked back with expressions showing limited
comprehension, but one tentatively raised her hand.
"Yes?" asked the disciple.
"Why are you doing this?"
"Why am I doing what?" said the disciple.
Nakor stopped and listened.
"Not you, all of you. Why are you preaching this message of good?"

and now served as his personal quarters. A half-dozen sleeping mats were strewn across the floor, and a small brazier heated a pot of water.

"What is your name, girl?"

"Aleta," answered the young woman. "Why?"

"Because you interest me."

The girl looked Nakor up and down frankly, and said, "Well, priest, you don't interest me if you're looking for a companion."

Nakor laughed. "That's funny. No, you interest me because you're curious." He poured tea and handed her a small cup. "It's not very good, but it's hot."

She sipped at it and said, "I agree. It is not very good."

"Now, about your question. I will answer you if you tell me what brought you here."

"I worked at an inn to the west of here before the war. It is now ashes. I almost starved during the winter. I have managed to stay alive

without having to spread my legs or kill anyone, but I'm hungry, and your monk said there's to be food."

"A frank answer. Good. There will be food," said Nakor. "As to why we do this, let me ask you a question. What is the nature of good and evil?"

The girl blinked, and Nakor studied her as she framed her reply. She appeared to be in her middle twenties. She had a plain face, with

wide-set eyes that made her appear to be as curious as her questions showed her to be, and her nose was straight. Her mouth was full, and her chin

was strong, and the entire effect was more attractive than not, Nakor

sure, but out there, somewhere, good and evil exist, I guess."

"Good guess," said Nakor, smiling. "How would you like to stay with us?,,

"That depends," she said, skepticism clearly evident. "For what purpose?"

"

I need Smart men and women. I need people who realize that what we're doing is important, without taking themselves too importantly." Suddenly the girl laughed. "I've never taken myself very seriously."

"Good, neither have I."

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, 'What is it you're doing. "

Nakor's manner and voice turned serious. "Out there are forces beyond your understanding. Beyond mine, too." He grinned, then returned to a serious demeanor. "Many of those qualities many people think of

as

being 'abstractions' are truly objective entities. Do you understand me?"

The girl shook her head. "I have no idea what you just said."

Nakor laughed. "Very good. You are honest. Let me put it another

way. The Good Goddess is sleeping. She is in a trance caused by evil

...I'll be much more willing to believe for a while.

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Nakor said, "If I can find you some cartwrights, would you do something for me?"
'What?'

"A favor."

Roo smiled. His narrow face showed his own wry sense of humor. Coming to the surface. "You're setting me up, aren't you?"
Nakor laughed. "Never trick a trickster."

"What is it?"

"If I can get you six cartwrights, I want you to commission a statue to be made for me."

"A statue? What for?"

"Fair enough." Nakor rose as Roo came into the office. "We'll feed you for as long as you wish to stay here, and you'll learn to do good in the Lady's name."

The girl departed and Roo said, "Another convert?"

"Perhaps," said Nakor. "Potentially. She's brighter than most."

Roo said, "Attractive, too, in a funny way. Not pretty, but attractive."

Nakor grinned. "I know."

Roo sat and Nakor offered him a cup of tea. "Sorry the order is short,

the cartrights in Salador are building for the army. If Patrick would convince the King to let me have his wagons, I could deliver them stocked

with goods, but they're bringing more equipment-arms, saddles, blankets, and the like."

Nakor nodded. "You need to get your businesses here back up and running."

Roo laughed. "If only I could."

"What about building wagons here?"

"No cartrights. I know a little about keeping them-I was raised a teamster, after all-but not about building one. I know a little carpentry, but I don't know the metal work, and turning a wheel is a special skill."

"I'll tell you after I get the men. Will you do it?"

A calculating look crossed Roo's face, and he said, "Make it six cartwrights, a master smith, and three lumbermen, and I'll commission two statues. "

"Done," said Nakor, slapping the table with his hand. "I'll have them for you tomorrow. Where should I send them?"

"I converted a warehouse outside the city to an office here in Darkmoor.

I'll use it as a base until I can return to Krondor. Go out the eastern

gate, and at the first road, turn left. It's the large green warehouse on the right. You can't miss it."

Nakor said, "I'll find it."

"There's something about that girl," said Roo, indicating where Aleta had gone. "I can't quite put my finger on what it is."

religion. Now, my question is, what are you really up to?
Nakor grinned. "I'm starting something important. I'm not sure how
it will turn out, and I doubt if I'll be around to see it at the end,
but I'm
doing something that may be the most important thing I've done in my
lif,
e .

"And may I ask what that is?"

Nakor used his hand to indicate the poor building in which they sat.

"I'm building a church."

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Roo shook his head. "If you say so. Tell me, Nakor, has anyone ever
called you mad?"

Nakor laughed. "Often, and most of the time they're serious."

Roo rose. "Thanks for the tea. I'll see what I can do about the
grain,

and if you get me those workers, I'll have those statues commissioned
for

you.' I

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Sho Pi entered and said, "Master, those who came to hear the lesson
are ready for food."

"Then let us feed them," said Nakor.

The odd gambler turned religious leader halted at the office door and

entered
the warehouse and helped his disciples feed the hungry.

Erik pointed and said, "What do you see there?"

"Something's coming along the road," said Akee, the Hadati hillman.

"A single man, on horseback."

Erik squinted against the setting sun. Sure enough, what had been a faint movement, a speck of darkness against the bright sky, resolved itself

into the figure of a man on horseback, trotting along the King's Highway.

Erik von Darkmoor, Captain of the Crimson Eagles, and a mixed detachment consisting of members of his own company, Hadati hillmen, and members of the Royal Krondorian Pathfinders were spread out on either side of the highway. "One of ours?" asked Erik.

Akee said, "I think so. I think it's Jimmy Jamison."

"How can you tell?"

The Hadati smiled. "You learn to recognize a friend by the way he sits his mount."

Erik turned to see if the man was joking and saw that he wasn't.

During the winter Erik had spent enough time with the Hadati hillmen and his company to come to respect him and even like him as much as one could the somewhat standoffish hill fighters. Akee was a leader in his

village and considered an important voice in the council of the Hadati

people up in Yabon, that much Erik had come to understand.

He had also discovered the man was the grandson of a companion of

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SHAP, I)S OF A BPOKEN CPOWN

Jimmy has not having been among them.

Jimmy rode closer and Erik and Akee left the shelter of the wood and rode toward him. Jimmy reined in until he recognized the two familiar

figures, then he raised his hand in greeting.

As they stopped before him, Erik nodded, and Akee said, "You look] as if you've been through something unpleasant."

"It could have been worse," said Jimmy.

Erik asked, "Dash?"

Jimmy shook his head. "He was captured for a while, but he go away. I don't know if he's somewhere in the city, or if he got loose.

I he's loose, he's on his way back here. If he's in the city and is caught

I've got assurances he won't be harmed."

"Assurances?" said Erik.

"It's a long story. One I need to tell Prince Patrick, or at the least

Owen Greylock."

"You're in luck," said Erik. "I'm heading back toward Ravensburg, where Owen has his forward command. The Prince is still in Darkmoor, but the roads are ours between here and there, almost as peaceful as before

the war. You can reach the Prince in less than a week."

Jimmy said, "Good. I have grown very tired of the road and would love nothing more than a hot meal, a bath, and a soft bed."

Erik nodded and said to Akee, "Have your scouts move west for another day and report back."

Jimmy said, "There's no need. General Duko is recalling all his patrols.

miles on

each side of the highway."

"You haven't had a lot of problems in the last few weeks, have you?"

"No, actually. A few bandits, some deserters, and a couple of run-ins with some mercenaries from our neighbors to the south, but we've seen little of Fadawah's forces for a while."

"Duko's looking to cut a deal with Patrick."

"He's willing to turn coat?" asked Erik. Erik had served two tours across the sea and was familiar with the Novindus mercenaries'

tradition

of serving the highest bidder. The dependence on such forces was one of

the reasons, Erik was convinced, that no one had successfully built an

empire down there, until the Emerald Queen had started her conquests.

"Not exactly," said Jimmy, filling in Erik on Duko's proposal.

Erik whistled. "I don't think Patrick is going to be pleased with this

one. From what Greylock's told me and what I saw before I left Darkmoor,

the Prince is spoiling for a fight, Kesh, invaders, he doesn't care who. ' y

Jimmy said, "I'll leave it to my father and Owen to convince him.

It's too good a turn of the cards for him to not agree. He saves thousands

of lives and accelerates the retaking of the Western Realm by a year if he

agrees. ~ y

Erik said nothing, but considering what he had seen of the hot-tempered

young Prince, he was not convinced Patrick would see it that way.

conversation may have no meaning. If you do not, shortly I will die. Healing priests can only do so much, and I am an old man, anyway. Another will come forward to take the office I hold. Who he will be I cannot know, though I have a couple of guesses. John Tuppin might take the office-he's strong and shrewd and many are afraid of him. Trina might, if she's smart and silent, which she is, and can keep behind the scenes. But whoever it is, the agreements you and I reach will not be binding upon him. As I said, if you can't get the Prince to agree to giving us pardon for past crimes, it doesn't matter.

"But if you return with promises, they had best be kept, for if you are

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

forsworn to the Mockers, no matter how high You rise, where you live or what great office comes to you, eventually one Of Our brotherhood will find you in the night and Your life will end. Do You understand?"

Dash said, "I understand."

"Know this as well, Dashed Jamison: once you step through that door you have taken blood oath not, by word or deed, to betray what you have seen here, nor may you bear witness against any who you've met. It is an oath made by silence, for you may not live to leave Mother's without such oath."

Dash didn't like being threatened, but he had heard enough stories

of
the Mockers, I would have wagered our ways and secrets were
inviolable.

In moments I learned that Jimmy the Hand had been watching us as we
had been watching him, more, he had others watch us while he was not

about. In the end, he was a far better Duke than I was leader of the
Mockers. "

Dash shrugged. "If Patrick does as I request, it all ends, anyway."

The old man laughed. "Think you that a pardon will take this ragged
brotherhood of ours and set our feet upon the straight and narrow
path?

Within minutes of such pardon some of our more reckless Youth will be
cutting purses in the market square or breaking into warehouse
cellars,

Young Dash. The dodgy path is as much a part of who we are as it is a
choice in life.

"Some, like your grandfather, find an escape, a way to better them

selves, but most are confined to Mother's and the sewers of the city,
the

rooftops-the Thieves' Highway-and a short life ending with a hang

man's rope. It is as much a prison as the one in the basement of the
Palace, this life, for there is little chance of escape."

Dash shrugged. "At least everyone, you, Trina, the rest, will have a
choice. Most men
can't ask more than that."

The old man laughed his dry laugh. "You're wise beyond your years,

I)ash, if you really understand that and are not merely mouthing
words

Talwin said, "I just want to get out of the city."II

"Then it's the three of us."

Trina came and stood before Dash. "Well, Puppy, I'll show you back to the safest way out. Wait until nightfall, then get out of the outer camps.

Rumors are starting to circulate that the Prince's army is getting close and

men are sleeping close to their swords. There aren't many friends to be

found in a place like that."

Dash nodded and asked, "Weapons?"

"We have some for you," said the heavyset man who had been his first captor, the man Dash knew as John Tuppin. "We'll give them to you

just before you leave."

Dash nodded. "Then let's be off."

He glanced over his shoulder at the closed door, behind which sat the old man who claimed one of the most mysterious names in the history of

Krondor, the Upright Man. Dash wondered if he'd ever see the old man

again.

They set off in the gloom.

pug sat quietly considering the choices that were rapidly approaching.

Miranda watched him.

After a few moments, he turned his attention from whatever image hung, in the air outside his window and said, "What?"

She laughed. "You were millions of miles away, weren't you?"

He smiled at her. "Not really. Just a few hundred. But I was years

away.

She settled easily into his lap and said, "Tell me."

Gathis's's choice. The Gods' choice, really."

"Have you decided what you must do?"

He nodded. "I think for me there is only one choice."

After a moment of silence, she said, "Care to share it with me?"

He laughed, kissing her on the neck. She squealed appreciatively, then

playfully pushed herself away. "You'll not divert me that easily.

What are

you thinking?"

Pug smiled. "When I lay in Death's Hall, I was given the choice to become your father's heir."

At mention of Macros the Black, Miranda frowned. She had never had a close relationship with her father, and the primary reason for that

had been his association with great powers. His role as human surrogate

for Sarig, the lost God of Magic, had reduced his role in her life to a scant

decade out of nearly two hundred years she had lived so far.

Pug continued. "I can't be Sarig's agent on Midkemia. That's not my role. "

"From what you told me, your other choices weren't that appealing."

Pug looked worried. "I didn't die, so that narrows my choice down to one: I must live and watch destruction and death and lose that which

is most dear to me."

She returned to his lap, and said, "That has already been fulfilled. Your daughter and son were taken from you, weren't they?"

Pug nodded, and she could see the echoes of pain still not dulled within his eyes. "But I fear there is more to lose."

She settled into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder. "There is

"I could use one now, I think."

Miranda said, "I shall teach you."

Pug looked at her. "You will?"

She kissed him. "And you shall teach me. And we shall teach your students on my father's island, and they shall teach us. We have books

yet to be read and understood, and we have the Hall of Worlds, through

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which we can reach out to wisdom undreamed of on this tiny orb. And we have ages to do it."

Pug sighed. "You make me feel as if there's hope."

Miranda said, "There is always hope."

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There came a knock at the door and Miranda stood, allowing Pug to rise to answer the door. Outside stood a royal page, and he said, "My lord, the Prince requests your presence at once."

Pug glanced at Miranda, who shrugged in curiosity but said nothing. He nodded to her, and followed the page.

He wended his way through Castle Darkmoor, until he came to the old Baron's quarters, being used presently by Prince Patrick. The page

opened the door and stepped aside, allowing Pug to enter.

Patrick looked up from old Baron Otto's desk and said, "Magician, we have a problem I hope you can deal with."

"What may that be, Your Highness?"

Patrick held up a rolled-up parchment. "A report in from the North, The Saaur have decided to put in an appearance."

"From the North?" Pug looked puzzled. When he had persuaded the

Patrick threw down the parchment. "Read about it. They overran a detachment held in reserve in the foothills, to reinforce whichever gap

Fadawah might attempt to breach along Nightmare Ridge. They slaughtered

every man in the company."

"Are they continuing to move?"

"No," said Patrick. "That's the good news in this. They seem content to butcher three hundred of my soldiers, then withdraw. They left us a

warning, though."

"What is that?"

"They left three hundred stakes in the ground. Atop each was a man's head. It's a clear challenge."

"No, Highness," corrected Pug. "It's not a challenge. It's a warning."

"A warning to whom?" Patrick said, his anger barely held in check.

"To anyone. To us, to Fadawah, to the Brotherhood of the Dark Path any creature of intelligence who is near enough to see the skulls. Jatuk i

telling us that the Saaur are claiming the Thunderhell Steppes for themselves,

selves and for us to stay out.,,

Patrick considered it and said, "Save nomads, weapons runners, and outlaws, no one lives there I would care to name Citizen of the Kingdom

but it's still our Realm. I will be damned to the lower hells before I allow

an army of aliens to overrun my troops and declare themselves an

"What would you have me call them?"

"Tell them they must cease this hostility against us, and withdraw from our lands."

"To where, Highness?"

Patrick said, "I don't care where. They can have safe conduct to the

coast, and they can swim home for all I care, but I Won't have them telling me to stay out of any part of my own principality! There's been

too damn much of that lately!" Patrick's voice was rising and Pug could

tell anger was getting the best of him.

"I will be pleased to go, Highness."

"Good," said Patrick, his tone leveling off. "I've sent word to Captain

Subai, who's in charge of the northern elements of our forces along the

ridge, that someone would be coming. I want you to have him accompany

You and I want this matter resolved. I've got enough to worry about with

this business down in Stardock, Kesh acting foolish, and Fadawah living

in my Principality to have the Saaur act up.

"If they'll listen to reason, I'll listen to reason. Have them tell me

what we must do to get them Out of our Kingdom and I will do it. But if

they refuse, there's only one thing you can do."

"What is that, Highness?"

Patrick looked at Pug as if he were missing the obvious. He said

"Why, you must destroy them,

the face of the world."

had the good night's sleep, in Owen Greylock's camp, when he spent the next five days in the saddle, tiring out a string of relay horses.

He and the Knight-Marshal of Kronдор rode as quickly as possible to Darkmoor, where Prince Patrick's court was established.

Now he stood outside Patrick's quarters, having ridden in just before dawn. He waited along with other courtiers, while the Prince was dressing

for the day's court, and thanked all the gods he could think of that at least

there an ample supply of Keshian coffee was still to be found. Tsurani chocha was a reasonable substitute, but nothing kept him going like a hot

mug of coffee, cut with a tiny bit of honey.

"James!" said a familiar feminine voice from behind, and Jimmy was suddenly wide awake. He turned to see a young woman approaching.

"Francie?" he asked in astonishment.

In a serious breach of court protocol, the girl threw her arms around Jimmy's neck, and said, "It's been years!"

Jimmy hugged the girl back. He then stepped back and regarded her.

"You're all grown up," he said, admiring that fact. She was a tall girl,

slender yet muscular in his embrace, as if she had spent a great deal of

time outdoors in vigorous physical activity. Her face was lacking the usual

cosmetics of the women of court; sun freckles lightly brushed her cheeks

and nose. Her hair, usually a light brown, was lavishly streaked with blond

highlights. She wore a very mannish vest and trousers, white shirt, and

riding boots.

"I was just coming back from an early morning ride with Father and

and me when we lived in Rillanon and business would bring Lord Brian to court. She's Dash's age, and last time I saw her she was just a skinny kid. She had a terrible crush on me for the longest time." "Ah," was all Owen said, as the Prince's page appeared. The page saw Greylock, and said, "Marshal Greylock, His Highness will see you first."

Owen motioned for Jimmy to follow him, and they entered Patrick's quarters.

The Prince remained seated behind his desk, cluttered with papers

and a small silver tray with hot rolls and a pot of coffee. Duke

Arutha sat

quietly at the left end of the desk. He looked at his son and smiled.

"I

can't tell you how pleased I am to see you. Dash?"

Jimmy shook his head. "He's out there somewhere." Arutha's smile faded.

Patrick finished a mouthful of roll and said, "What news of Krondor?"

Owen said, "Jimmy brings a message from General Duko."

Patrick asked, "From General Duko?"

Jimmy said, "The invaders are having a falling-out, it seems." He

outlined what Duko had told him of his suspicions regarding Fadawah

and Nordan, and finished up with, "So the General has a proposal to

keep himself and his men from being sacrificed and return Krondor to

Your Highness without bloodshed."

Patrick's face was an unreadable mask. Jimmy could see the Prince

already could sense where this was going. "Go on," said the Prince of

Krondor.

"Duko sees no point in returning to Novindus. The continent is a

waste after ten years of warfare, and. . . " Jimmy paused.

father, as well?"

Jimmy attempted to keep it light. "Nothing so grand, Highness. A

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SHARDS OF A BROICEN CROWN

Barony, perhaps."

"Barony!" Patrick exploded, slamming his hand on the table, upsetting the coffeepot and spilling the hot liquid over the rolls and across a dozen parchments. The page standing nearby sprang to clean up the mess

while the Prince stood up. "The murdering dog has the effrontery to seize

my city then hold me up for a Barony to give it back! The thief has no

lack of gall." He looked at Owen and Arutha. "Is there any reason I shouldn't order the army into the field and simply hang the bastard after

we retake Krondor?"

Arutha said, "There are several reasons, Highness."

Patrick looked at him. "They are?"

"By making a bargain with Duko, we take the enemy's forces and reduce them by a third. We increase our forces by that much. We save the lives of countless men. We then have an advance unit to throw at Sarth, and we free up men needed to reinforce the southern marches, holding Kesh at bay." Arutha seemed reluctant to continue, but finished

by saying, "If Duko is being forthright and this isn't some sort of elaborate

ruse, it's too good an opportunity to pass up."

"Sit down, Patrick."
Prince of the Western Realm or not, Arutha had been one of Patrick's tutors, and old habits were hard to break. He sat behind his desk, looking daggers at Arutha, but remaining silent.

"You must think like a Prince. No matter what else you do with the invaders, you must also deal with Kesh. They are only restraining themselves because the magicians at Stardock are as likely to destroy their forces as they are ours should either side not abide by the present truce.

The only way you can deal with Great Kesh is from a position of strength.

"You must reclaim Yabon. To do that you must clear the Western Realm west of the Calastius Mountains, and to do that you have to take

Sarth. If you are forced to fight for Krondor, you will not be able to launch

a campaign against Sarth until the middle of summer, at the soonest!"

Arutha's temper was also rising, but he did a masterful job of keeping his tone under control. "If you have any sort of protracted campaign against

Sarth, that means a winter campaign against Ylith or holding off until the following year. By then LaMut will have fallen. If you give Fadawah another winter to consolidate his holdings, we may never regain the North!" He lowered his voice. "Fadawah has already bribed key officials

Patrick looked as if he was frustrated to the point of tears. But he kept his voice and anger under control as he said, "So you're telling me unless I make a bargain with this murderous scum I may be fighting a three-front war I can't win?" Arutha sighed loudly. "That's exactly what we're telling you, Highness. "

Patrick's fury was barely held in check. He was intelligent enough to know that Arutha was right, but angry enough to be unwilling to admit it. "There must be another way."

"Yes," said Owen. "You can march to the walls of Krondor, through the assembled mercenaries camped outside, swarm the city and fight house to house for a week, then spend another month licking your wounds and getting ready to march north." Patrick seemed to lose his anger. "Damn," was all he said. For a long moment, he was silent, then one more time he said, "Damn." Arutha said, "Patrick, you can't reject this offer. An invading general is seeking to make a separate peace with us, and only the King can reject that offer. Do you want to guess that your father will say no? He'll ratify

any deal you and I strike with Duko, that much I know. All we need are some assurances that this isn't a trick of Fadawah's." Jimmy said, "Highness, I only spent a few days with the man, but I

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possessed the Emerald Queen, when she created her Immortals, her
Death
Guard, the men who surrounded her and who willingly died for her, one
each night, so that she might keep intact her death magic. By then
any
man who showed the slightest hesitation was destroyed, common soldier
or general, it didn't matter. That was demonstrated early in the
campaign
when some captains tried a revolt, and all were impaled, with the
bulk of
her army forced to march by the men while they still twitched as they
died. After the fall of Maharta, General Gapi was staked out over an
anthill for letting Captain Calis and his men escape. That showed no
one,
no matter what rank, was safe from her wrath. Companies were
instructed
to watch other companies, so no one knew who could be trusted not to
report if even a hint of defiance was suspected.
"Duko spent the winter talking to Kingdom prisoners, soldiers and
commoners, some officers from the garrisons down at Land's End and up
at Sarth. He's fascinated by our way of living, our government, our
Great
Freedom, and he thinks it a wondrous thing, our idea of nation. He
was

butcher into our nobility."

Owen laughed.

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"Is there something funny in this, Lord Greylock?" asked the Prince.

"Only that I imagine an ancestor of yours may have said exactly the same thing about the first Baron to live in this castle," said Greylock, smiling.

Patrick paused, then sighed. After a moment, he chuckled. "One of my teachers told me the King of Rillanon had drunk himself into near insensibility over the need to accept Bas-Tyra into his service, rather than hang him from the walls of his city."

"Many of our most noble lords had ancestors who were nothing more than enemies we chose not to hang, Highness," said Arutha.

"Well," said Patrick, "we have no shortage of openings for nobles in the West. Where shall we place 'Lord' Duko?"

Arutha said, "There are several Earldoms, a score of Baronies, and one Duchy in need of new nobles."

Owen said, "We need a Duke of the Southern Marches."

Patrick looked at James. "What do you think of throwing that rabble in Krondor at the Keshians?"

Jimmy said, "Highness, I hesitate to advise.

Patrick looked sharply at Jimmy. "Don't get modest on me at this late date, James. You'd be the first in your family in three generations and I wouldn't believe it anyway."

Owen knew exactly what he thought of it; he had been discussing this plan with Jimmy the entire journey from his headquarters camp to Darkmoor. "

It's risky, Highness, but far less risky than trapping Duke between our army and Nordan's and making his men fight for their lives. And if we move them down to face Kesh, we don't have to worry about Duke's men facing their former comrades, or any spies Fadawah might have in their ranks. Besides, half the men living in the Vale of dreams are mercenaries, fighting for us or against us at whim; Duke may be exactly the man to rule such as those." He paused, as if thinking about his next statement, which had been rehearsed in his mind many times already.

"If we continue to dredge the harbor, and get the city back into a semblance of order in the next month, we can drive on to Sarth in six weeks. That would put us six weeks ahead of schedule. We could be at the gates of Ylith before the fall rains come."

Patrick said, "I'll prepare messages for my father. If I can't give the murderous bastard to the hangman, I'll give him to the Keshians.

We'll need to send a message to welcome our newest Duke into the 'family, and let him know to prepare for a mobilization of his men."

James rose, and said, "If Your Highness will excuse me?"

Patrick waved him away, and Arutha rose. "If I may be excused for a few minutes to speak with my son?"

Patrick nodded and turned to his page. "Have a scribe come here at Once.

Arutha led his son out to the waiting room and moved away from the

'A servant from the Vale of Dreams we encountered. His caravan was attacked and he survived in the wilderness for a month or more."

"Malar," said Arutha. "That name's familiar."

"Malar Enares," Jimmy supplied. "That's his full name."

"Yes, it's familiar, but I can't place it."

"I don't know why you'd know it, Father. His master was an important merchant, perhaps that's where you know it from."

Arutha said, "Most of my records are still in boxes from when we evacuated Krondor. Normally, I'd have my clerk look for that name. If

I still had a clerk."

Jimmy said, "Well, if you recognize the name, he's more than he seems to be. I'll keep an eye on him if he's still around when I get back

to Krondor."

Arutha put his hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "Do that. Rest now and be ready to leave in a day or two. Patrick should have something to send

to Duko in two days at the outside. We'll need some sort of ceremony and pomp, a formal surrender and an investiture of office. I wish old Jerome was still alive."

Jimmy grinned. "Grandfather never got along with him."

"No, but he was as good a Master of Ceremony as I've ever known.

If you needed the proper welcoming ceremony for a creature from the lower hells, he could find it for you and have it ready on short notice."

Jimmy said, "I think a meal and a nap will do for me right now."

"By the way," said Arutha, "Lord Silden is here. He brought Francine with him."

"I saw her, just before I went in to see you and the Prince. She was coming in from a morning ride. She's grown up."

"I remember you used to think her a pest when you were children in

he
wasn't as tired as he had been before. He decided he might wander
down
to the guard captain's office to see if any reports from the West had
come
in since the night before. He might be lucky and hear something of
Dash.

Pug moved through the door of the "temple," finding it empty. From
behind the converted warehouse he could hear the sounds of shouts and
children laughing. He hurried through the empty building, past a
makeshift
altar, through a kitchen area, and into the work yard attached to the
old warehouse.

Nakor squatted near a child who was blowing bubbles with soapy
water. Other children chased and grabbed at the bubbles~ but the
former
gambler stared intently at a bubble being formed on the end of the
little
boy's pipe. It expanded, as Nakor said, "Slowly, slowly."
Then, as it reached the size of a melon, the little boy gave in to
the
impulse to blow hard, and it popped as a stream of tiny bubbles
surged
from the tip of the pipe. The other children in the yard erupted in
laughter,
shrieking with delight as the bubbles sailed away on the afternoon
breeze.

Pug laughed and Nakor turned. At seeing the magician, Nakor's face
split into a wide grin. "Pug, what wondrous timing!"
Pug approached and they shook hands. "Why?"
"The bubble. A thought came to me while watching these children
and I needed to ask you something."

ppended:

Nakor laughed and did a tiny dance for a minute. " I have it!"

"Have what?"

"I have been wrestling with a thought since you told me that story, years ago. Now I think I understand something. Watch the boy as he blow's a bubble." He turned to the boy. "Charles, again, please."

The boy obliged by blowing a single large bubble. "Watch it expand!" insisted Nakor. "See how it grows larger!"

"Yes," said Pug. "what is the point?"

"It's a drop of soapy water, but you force air inside, and it grows!

It

gets bigger, but the content of the water droplet is the same. Don't

you

se?

"what?" asked Pug, genuinely perplexed at Nakor's latest revelation.

"The universe! It's a bubble!"

Pug said, "oh. . ." He paused. "I don't see."

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Using his hand, Nakor made a curving motion, as if describing a sphere in the air. "The stuff of the universe, it was blown outward, like

the soap bubble! Everything in the universe, is on the surface of the bubble!"

Pug stopped a moment, considered what he heard, then said, "That's amazing."

"Everything is moving away from everything else at the same speed.

That's the only way it's possible."

Pug was genuinely impressed with the insight. "Now, what does it mean?"

"What it means is we now have a clue as to how things in the universe work. And that might give us a better understanding of what it is we do

ng said, "You're right. I'm certain."

Nakor said, "You had a reason to visit with me?"

"Yes, I need your help."

Nakor said, "Children, continue playing."
"Who are these children?" asked Pug as Nakor led him back into the temple.

"The sons and daughters of people who live nearby, people who are attempting to rebuild their ruined homes and businesses, but who have no place for their children while they do. We give them a safe place to leave the children rather than let them run the streets."

"And when the businesses are rebuilt, the children will return to help their parents."

"Correct," said Nakor. "In the meantime, we build some nice credits with people who will be inclined to help us out along the way. Skilled

tradesmen, for the most part."

"You're really committed to this Temple of Arch-Indar, aren't you?"

"I'm committed to getting it built," said Nakor.

"After that?"

Nakor shrugged. "I don't know. I'll leave this to someone better able to run it than myself. It's not really my calling. If it were the Temple of

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the Lost God of Knowledge, maybe, though I think I've had enough of Wodar-Hospur's handiwork for a lifetime." He referred to the magic codex which he had possessed for many years, an artifact which had given

then I would look foolish."

"Heaven forbid," Pug said dryly.

"Now what sort of help do you need from me?"

Pug explained the situation with the Saaur to the north, then finished

by saying, "Patrick wants me to deliver an ultimatum, and if they refuse

to depart from the Kingdom, he's ordered me to destroy them."

Nakor frowned. "Tales of your powers have been circulating for some years, my friend. I thought it but a matter of time before someone in authority attempted to bend you to their cause."

"I've served the Kingdom without orders before."

"True, but you've never been under the authority of an impetuous boy before."

Pug sat back in his chair, and said, "I've never considered myself under anyone's authority since coming to my power. As a Great One of the Tsurani Empire, I was outside the law, subject to no authority save

MY own conscience and a mandate to do what was best for the Empire.

"Since returning to Midkemia, the crown was content to leave me alone, to let me conduct my business down in Stardock as I saw fit.

King

Borric, and King Lyam before him, were satisfied knowing I would do nothing to cause harm to their realms. Now, about this 'go destroy

our

enemies' order of Patrick's, I'm not sure what's best to do."

Nakor pointed at Pug. "You've lived on another world, Pug. That

boy up in the castle has barely spent more than a couple of years of his

life off the island of Rillanon. You've been a slave and a man beyond the

...manipulation.

"Maybe I should go to the King."

Nakor said, "Perhaps, but I'd save that option until you've talked to the Saaur and seen if you can convince them to leave."

"Would you consider coming with me? You have a wonderful knack for knowing what to do in unusual situations."

Nakor was silent a moment, then said, "Preventing the death of many would be a good act. Yes, I'll come with you. But you could do me a favor, first.

~(T^at?~1

"Come with me."

Pug stood and followed Nakor out of the office. In the far corner of the large hall Sho Pi and a pair of acolytes were in discussion.

Nakor

shouted, "Sho Pi, you keep an eye on the children. I'll be back."

He took Pug through the streets toward the castle, but short of where they would normally turn to approach the main drawbridge of the castle,

they turned and followed another street down toward a burned-out section

of the city. Reaching a checkpoint, they were halted by a pair of guardsmen,

wearing tabards of the Baron of Darkmoor. "Halt," said one in a bored tone of voice.

Nakor said, "This is Pug, Duke of Stardock, on a mission for the Prince of Krondor."

"Sir!" said the guard, coming to attention. He might not have seen the magician before, but every soldier in the West knew of him by reputation

and he looked the part.

"We need to commandeer a score of prisoners for a work detail," said

guard and climbed deep in. He shouted in the language of Novindas, "need some workers."
A few men nearby looked over and one or two continued to pay attention, but no one came near. Nakor waited a moment, then climbed down. "This isn't working. Come along."

He hurried deeper into the milling camp of men. On all sides dirty and hungry-looking mercenaries sat in idle conversation. As he moved deeper into the press of men, he said, "I need some carpenters, cartwrights, wheelwrights, wagon makers!"

One man said, "I used to be a carpenter, before I was forced to fight."

"Can you turn a wheel?"

The man nodded. "I can shave spokes, too."

"Come with me!"

"Why should I?" said the man. He was in his fifties, grey-haired, and looked filthy and miserable.

"Because you've got nothing better to do, have you? And you'll get better food and you'll get paid."

At that the man said, "Paid? I'm a prisoner."

"Not anymore, if you want work. I'll make you a priest of Arch-Indar."

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"Who?" asked the man in confusion.

"The Good Lady," said Nakor impatiently. "Now, just come along and say nothing."

The exchange was repeated a half-dozen more times, until Nakor had selected seven men with the required experience. Several others had come forth, but lacked the requisite skills. When they had returned to the pair of guards manning the exit, Pug said, "I'm taking these men with me."

Sho Pi and added, "I hope they take such."

"Then send a message to Rupert Avery and tell him his workers are waiting for him."

Pug said, "Workers?"

Nakor nodded. "Roo's going to start up a little wagon-building enterPrise

as soon as we return to the camp in the morning and get him some lumbermen. "

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"Lumbermen?" asked Pug.

Nakor grinned. "I'll explain it all as we travel."

Pug returned the smile.

Nakor said, "One favor more."

"What is that?" ire the Lady

Nakor lowered his voice. "I strongly urge you to request

Miranda stay behind."

Pug said, "Miranda can take care of herself."

"I fear not for her competence, but rather that well-demonstrated temper

of hers. You are going inharm'ss way, even if the risks are minimal.

She might not react well to a threat."

Pug said, "I doubt she'd cause another war, but I see what you mean." He was thoughtful for a moment, then said, "I think I'd like

her to visit Tomas and see how things are to the north, anyway. We're getting

almost nothing from Crydee or Elvandar, and if we're going to be moving

quickly to retake Ylith, knowing how the struggle for Yabon goes is vital."

"

"She has the means to travel there?"

Eight

will be traveling by horse. I

DASH SIGNALLED.

The guards at the sentry post waved him and his companions forward.

Dash, Gustaf, and Talwin had trudged along the road for three days, not catching sight of anyone, save for what they took to be a roving bunch

of bandits late the second afternoon. Duko had pulled back his forces

to

just outside of Krondor, so the patrols that had caused the brothers

so

much difficulty just a few weeks earlier were now nonexistent.

The nearest soldier said, "Who goes there?"

Dash answered, "I'm Dashel Jamison, Baron of the King's Court."

Gustaf and Talwin exchanged surprised glances at that, but said nothing.

They knew something odd had gone on while they were prisoners of

the Mockers, and that Dash had spent time alone with their leader,

but

beyond that they only knew the young man was leading them away from

captivity and toward what they hoped would be a warm meal, clean

bedding,

and employment.

"Gar!" shouted the first soldier to the second. "Go get the

sergeant!"

The second soldier started up the road at a trot, toward the distant

lights of the Kingdom's forward encampment. Dash and the others

halted

before the first soldier. The man stood in awkward silence a long

minute,

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Gustaf, who then gave it to Talwin- Dash said, "I think I'll sit," and he

moved over to the side of the road and sat.

His companions joined him. They sat in silence, ignoring the curious sentry.

A short time later a group of riders approached from the Kingdom camp, leading three horses. A sergeant jumped down from the first horse,

handing the reins to the sentry, and said, "Baron Dashel?"

Dash stood up and said, "That's me."

"Captain von Darkmoor is at the forward location and is waiting for you and your companions, sir."

The three men rode with the escort a scant mile up the road to Erik's camp. He was waiting outside his headquarters tent and said, "Dash!

Your father will be pleased to hear you got back in one piece."

"What of my brother?" asked Dash as he dismounted.

"He arrived about a week ago; he and Owen hurried off to see the Prince and your father. Come inside."

Erik gave instructions to a soldier to find a place for Gustaf and Talwin

to spend the night, and once inside his command tent said, "Hot food is on the way."

"Good," said Dash, sitting heavily in a camp chair next to a large map table. He glanced at the map and said, "Getting ready to assault

Krondor?"

Erik shook his head. "We may not have to, if your brother's message from Duko is not some sort of lie."

"Message?"

"Jimmy got himself captured and was turned loose by Duko, bringing

...then what you saw?

After a few chews and a swallow, Dash said, "I got caught by Duko's men and put to work in a gang."

Erik said, "Interesting. They caught Jimmy coming into the city and took him for questioning."

Dash said, "I was already in the city and looking like a rat catcher, so they must have assumed I had just avoided capture for a while. I don't

know, but that would make sense. For all that Duko's doing there, it's still pretty confusing in places."

Erik nodded. "So you were in a work gang."

Dash took a sip of wine. "Yes, until I got out with three other men.

We slipped into one of the sewer culverts under the outer wall and headed

into the city. That's when we got grabbed by the Mockers."

"So the thieves still control the sewers of Krondor?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it 'control' as much as that there are some places Duko and his men haven't found yet, and they have a couple of safe ways in and out of the city."

Erik took a drink of wine and said, "That would have been a blessing if we were going to assault the city."

"You think he's sincere about wanting to change sides?"

"I don't know," answered Erik. "Your brother seemed to think so,

and he convinced Greylock, and if I know your father, they'll all convince

the Prince."

Dash shook his head. "That creates a problem for the Mockers."

'What?'

Dash. I'm sure your father and the Prince will want your opinion on the matter. "

Dash sat back, swallowed another mouthful, and said, "I have one idea. Just pardon everyone inside the walls and get on with it." He motioned with a fork over his shoulder. "I have no Illusions about those

mother-killers back there, and even fewer about the Mockers, despite my grandfather's wonderful stories. Most of those invaders would be rioting within weeks if they were forced to play garrison soldiers, and the thieves will be cutting purses or throats within a day of being pardoned." Speaking

around a mouthful of food, Dash shook his head. "No, the only difference between having the Mockers help us to get into the city or having Duke open the gates is me keeping a promise."

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Erik raised an eyebrow. "Is that a problem?"

"Only if the Mockers decide I forswore my promise and put a death mark on me."

Erik nodded. "Let me know if I can help."

Dash said, "I will. Though I suspect Father and Jimmy have persuaded Patrick to do whatever it is that Patrick is going to do."

"Well, do you want to wait here and see if they're heading our way?

I could send word you're alive. Or do you want to ride on to

Darkmoor?"

"Well, we'll get you some better clothing," said Erik. "We have spares, though you'll be back in uniform."
Dash shrugged. "As long as they're free of lice and fleas, I won't complain about fashion."
Erik laughed. "You can always hang your rags over the campfire."
"A dog soldier's washing," said Dash. "Yes, I've heard of that approach;
then your clothing stinks of woodsmoke for days. I'll settle for a uniform and you can bum these."

Erik laughed. "You can have the extra bedroll over there and bunk in with me tonight. I'll try not to wake you when I turn in later. "
He
moved toward the tent flap. "I have to check on some things before .
. . ."

He turned and saw that Dash was already on the pallet and asleep.
Moving
outside, Erik turned his mind to the tasks at hand, though for a brief
moment he considered how odd the situation before him was becoming.
Well, he decided, he'd leave it to the Prince and Duke to decide if
Duko was being straightforward or not, and then, as always was the
case,
he would follow his orders the best way he knew how.

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Pug reined in and the leader of his escort shouted the order to halt.
The patrol heading toward them was decked out in the black of
Kronador's
Crimson Eagles, the special unit founded by Calis, Erik von
Darkmoor's

each one of them unless we're heavily armored. What do you think the chances are of the Prince sending the Royal Lancers this way, magician?"

"I'm hoping that I can convince the Saaur that fighting us is a waste on both sides."

"Well, that would be novel. From what I've seen of them, peaceful isn't the first word that springs to mind when thinking of them." He glanced over his shoulder, then said, "Ride on another hour and

you'll hit our main camp. I'm out for a couple of days, so perhaps I'll see you on your way back." He looked at Nakor. "How's your new religion going?"

Nakor sighed theatrically. "Being good is difficult, Jadow." The good-natured former Sergeant laughed. "You state the obvious, my little friend." He waved his patrol after him. "Let's ride." As he

passed the leader of the patrol from Krondor, he accepted their sergeant's salute with a wave and nod.

Pug said, "Let's go see the Captain."

Nakor said, "Let's go eat. I'm hungry."

Pug laughed. "You're always hungry, my friend."

"You know," said Nakor as they rode along, "I had this odd notion-

"Really," said Pug, interrupting. "You'll have to tell me of it some other time."

Nakor laughed. "No, I mean really odd."

"Definitely some other time," said Pug.

.'.Very well," Nakor responded.

They rode in silence as they approached Captain Subai's camp. It was

the west; to the east of the road, the bank was almost a cliff face,
and

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below it any soldiers coming down along the base of the hills would
be

trapped in a narrowing defile. A pair of archers could hold off
anyone
coming along that way.

Soldiers hurried along to take Pug and Nakor's horses. The Men were
dressed in both the garb of the Royal Pathfinders and the Crimson
Eagles.

Pug and Nakor dismounted, and Pug asked one of the soldiers where
Captain Subai's tent was located. The soldier indicated a large tent
in the

very center of the camp, and Pug gave his thanks.

Pug turned to the Sergeant leading his escort, and said, "Thank you,
Sergeant. Rest tonight, then lead your men back in the morning. We'll
be

fine here."

The Sergeant saluted. He turned and gave the order to dismount, and
asked the second soldier where his men could care for their mounts.

As

the soldier directed the Sergeant, Pug and Nakor walked toward the
command
tent.

There was a single soldier sitting in a camp chair outside the tent.

As

they drew near, Pug saw that it wasn't a lazy sentry, but rather the
Pathfinder

captain, a gaunt man with prematurely grey hair and a face and hands the color of tanned leather, stood. "What orders?"

"I'm to venture down to the flatland to the east of here, then strike up into the Thunderhell Steppes, find the Saaur, and convince them not to attack our forces again."

The Captain raised an eyebrow in his most expressive reaction since Pug had first encountered him in Krondor. "Good luck to you m'lord." He put down the harness and said, "Will you be needing anything from me or my men."

Pug said, "I regret to say I must impose on you for an escort. The Prince thought it necessary."

The Captain smiled. "From what I've heard of you, I find that difficult

to believe. Still, if the Prince commands, we obey. I'll have a patrol ready

to accompany you at first light. Until then you'll have to make do with a

rough camp. I'll have a couple of my men double up in a tent, so you and your friend here can share one."

"Thanks," said Pug. He glanced at Nakor. "You'll sleep alone tonight, my friend, as I plan on staying another night with my wife."

"Going to flit back down to Darkmoor?"

"No, Miranda's at Sorcerer's Isle, and I want to see her again."

Nakor grinned. "I remember what it was like to be in love." He sighed. "That was a while back, though."

Pug took out a Tsurani transportation orb and said, "This is the last one. I'm going to have Miranda teach me the trick of getting around without one of these things." He started looking around the landscape.

To attempt to use the orb to go to a destination not well known to the

Subai nodded. The invaders held the other side of the northern passes, but they're not trying to cross the ridge of the mountains.

Our patrols can get within a few hundred yards of their positions before they come swarming out, but they only chase us a little way. They seem content to stay where they are."

"Undoubtedly," said Nakor. "They're fortifying defenses before every avenue of attack."

Subai nodded.

"I suppose you've found a few ways over the mountains they haven't found out yet."

"A few, mostly goat trails and footpaths. There are a couple of places

we might infiltrate a squad or two, potentially put men at their back as

we drive north, but no place we could stage on the other side for a major

offensive." The Captain glanced westward, as if seeing through the mountains

to where the enemy was on the other side. "Over there, just a week's ride if it were a straight path, lies Sarth. If we could somehow get inside

there, seize the old abbey above the town, and stage there, we could launch a flank attack in support of any forces coming from the south and

clear out the invaders in a few days, rather than the weeks it's going to take."

Nakor said, "Maybe there's a way."

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him, and threw her arms around him. "I missed you."
Pug echoed the sentiment. They hadn't been apart since the end of
fighting almost six months earlier, and it had taken him almost a
week to

reach Subai's camp in the mountains.

"How are things around here?" Pug asked after their embrace.

Miranda said, "Much as we left it. Gathis conducts the daily business
of the island in an exemplary fashion and it seems Robert d'Lyes has
become something of an organizer around here. He's taken to
reestablishing

the class schedule that lapsed with your last departure."

Pug smiled. "Good. I'll have to speak to him before I leave in the
morning."

She kissed him. "But not until after dinner. I want you to myself for
the next few hours."

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He smiled and said, "Not until then."

They spent the next two hours alone, then sent word to have supper
brought to their quarters. After dining, Gathis appeared outside the
door

as servants were removing the dinner trays.

"Master Pug," he said in greeting. The tall goblinlike creature was
always formal when addressing anyone, from Pug to the most menial of
servants. Though, even the most menial of servants on this island was

a

student of magic, from one end of Midkemia to the other, and from
distant
worlds.

"Gathis," Pug acknowledged. "How is everything."

"That is why I wished to speak to you. I fear something is amiss."

house that dominated Villa Beata-the Beautiful House as it was known in the ancient language of Queg.

He led them outside and across a meadow, and instantly Pug knew where he was leading them. As before, when he reached a grassy hillside,

Gathis waved his hand and a cave materialized. They entered and again Pug saw the small altar upon which rested the statue of Sarig, the lost

God of Magic. Miranda gasped. The first time they had seen the statue,

the features upon it resembled those of her father, Macros the Black.

"The face is blank!"

"Yes, mistress," said Gathis. "I came here a few days ago and saw what you see now."

"What does it mean?" asked Miranda.

Pug said, "The gods are waiting."

"For what?" she asked, touching the statue.

Pug's voice was soft. "For Sarig's new avatar, his new human agent on this world."

Miranda said, "Does this mean you?"

"No," said Pug. "when I lay near death in the healing glade of Elvandar,

when Lims-Kragma spoke to me, I was given three choices. Death was the first." He looked at Miranda. "I could not leave you." She smiled.

"The second choice was eternal life, but the price was becoming Sarig's next avatar. I would have replaced your father."

"I don't think I would have cared much for that." Then she looked at Pug. "What was the third choice?"

Pug said, "Nothing I care to talk about."

Anger flared up in Miranda's voice as she said, "Tell me!"

"I will die someday."

Gathis said, "The future is not fixed, though it can be difficult to change if events gain enough momentum."

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Pug nodded, and Miranda said, "I have no idea what that means.

What are you hiding. "

Pug said, "Only that in exchange for a very long life and a Feast deal of power I will have to eventually pay a high price."

Miranda said, "There's no 'only' about that."

Gathis said, "We all have prices to pay."

Pug changed the subject. "You've been the keeper of this shrine for ages, Gathis. What do you think this means?"

"I think a time of change is upon us, Master Pug, and soon someone will present himself to fill the void left by Macros's death."

Pug said, "I think you are right. Perhaps it's one of the students.

Pug remained silent a moment, then said, "Someone will find this shrine.

Gathis said, "I have evolved a very subtle but powerful spell to disguise

it, Master Pug."

"I know. I lived on this island for decades and never suspected it was

here, but whoever is fated to become Sarig's next tool will somehow find

this place."

Gathis pondered that observation, and said, "I think that is a likely possibility. "

where they had sat.
Robert d'Lyes said, "Pug, it is good to see you again."
"How have you found life on our tidy little island?" asked Pug. He had brought the young magician along with Miranda to the island during the winter. Robert had resigned as a member of the council at Stardock and had nowhere else to go. Patrick seemed indifferent to the idea of

a court magician, so Pug decided to employ him at the island.
"It's a wonderful place," said Robert. "I've learned more about my arts in the last month than I did in the previous two years at Stardock. "
Miranda and Pug glanced at one another. "That's impressive," said Pug, motioning for Gathis and Miranda to sit on a nearby bench .
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were the youngest member of the council and rose faster in the learning

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

of your craft than any student we had at Stardock. And you're learning

even faster here?"

Robert smiled. He had chosen to affect a beard in imitation of Pug, a flattery Pug didn't find appealing, but which he chose not to comment upon. "It's astonishing. What I find even more wonderful is that with practitioners of magic from other worlds I'm learning things Chalmers and Kalied never would have dreamt of."

Pug was now genuinely intrigued. "oh, really? Care to give me an example?"

expressions as Robert continued his song.

A flame appeared in the air, a foot or so before Robert's face. It

was

the size of a baby's finger, but clearly it was a flame. It flickered

and

danced in the wind, then suddenly went out. Robert looked tired, but

elated, as he said, "I'm just now starting to understand—a little of

what

Takkek has shown me, but give me time."

"I am impressed," said Pug. "Under the old labels used by the Tsurani

Assembly, that's Lesser Path magic, and should be close to impossible

for

you to perform."

Robert laughed. "I'm convinced Nakor was right: there is no magic,

just tricks, and if we open our minds, we can learn anything."

Rising, Pug said, "Well, enjoy the evening and don't set fire to the

house. Miranda and I are off. Oh, Robert," said Pug, turning to face

the

student.

"Yes, sir?"

"Gathis says you've been doing a good job in my absence. Continue

to help out, if you would, please."

"It's my pleasure," said the student.

Pug and Miranda returned to their quarters. As they reached the door,

Pug said, "That really was quite remarkable."

Miranda laughed and pushed him through the door. Playfully she

said, "I'll show you something remarkable."

She shut the door.

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majority
of them were high in the mountains to the west, scouting the enemy
and ready to return with reports on any movement of Fadawah's forces.
Their reputation for tracking, scouting, and stealth in the woodlands
was
legendary, rivaling that of Kesh's Imperial Guides and the Rangers of
the
Free Cities of Natal. Only the elves were said to be better.

Subai said, "Lieutenant Gunderson will lead the patrol accompanying
YOU.)

Pug saw that the Captain was providing an escort of a dozen men.
One, a trailbreaker Pug judged, was a Pathfinder, and he started
riding
ahead, while the others waited for Nakor and Pug to mount their
horses.

Subai pointed at Nakor. "I'm pleased to see that one go. I don't know
what's more irritating: his constant preaching on the subject of
'good,' or
his luck at cards."

Pug laughed. "I have a hunch which was more irritating."

Subai said, "We've packed provisions for two weeks."

"I'll find them in less time than that," said Pug as he hiked up his
black robe and climbed into the saddle.

"Just make sure you find them before they find you. By all reports
they come out of the grasslands like a wind and are over you before
you

even hear them coming."

Nakor said, "I've seen them. You can hear them coming."

Subai smiled, and Pug said, "Any other advice?"

"Don't get killed," said the Captain without a smile.

Pug nodded. "I have other plans." He nodded to the Lieutenant and
the order was given to ride off.

Nakor said, "I was talking to the Captain about some trails over the

had left the foothills the day before and were riding across grasslands, heading toward the southern entrance to the Thunderhell Steppes, a broad break in two ranges of hills, less than five miles across. They reached a point near signs of a large old campsite, and the Lieutenant ordered a halt. "This was our reserve camp. There were wooden walls, a dirt outer barrier, a drop gate. They overran it and killed everyone. He motioned with his hand. "They staked the heads in an arch starting here." Pug said, "Then this is where we will part company, Lieutenant." The young officer said, "I thought we were to accompany you until we found the Saaur." "A reasonable assumption but incorrect," said Pug. Nakor said, "Honestly, Lieutenant, we can take care of ourselves and having you along might cause us some extra trouble, trying to keep you all alive." The Lieutenant said, "Then may I ask why we're here at all, sir?" "Because I didn't feel like arguing with your Captain, if you must know," said Pug. "Do you mind if we wait, sir?" "Don't bother," said Pug. "If I don't get killed, I'll be traveling back to Darkmoor a lot faster than you can get there." The magician's reputation was widely spread throughout the army, and he was also a Duke, so whatever reservations the young officer might

had seen those horses, twice the size of the sturdy cavalry mounts they rode. Astride each would be a Saaur, twelve feet tall, reptilian warriors.

Soon dust could be seen in the distance.

Pug turned to make sure the Kingdom patrol was retreating and was pleased to see it was almost out of sight.

"Let's wait here," said Nakor.

Pug nodded. "They'll be here soon enough."

They waited, and in the distance they could see riders on the horizon.

The Saaur were coming.

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SHAP,DS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Nine

JIMMY WAVED.

Dash returned his brother's wave as he rode into the courtyard of Castle Darkmoor. After spending the night in Erik's company, he had taken a horse and ridden to the Prince's court. He had exchanged mounts

like a relay rider, anxious to get to court.

Dash dismounted and turned the reins of his horse over to a groom and embraced his brother. "I was concerned I might not see you again for a while," he said.

the troops ready to march, the brave banners and loud trumpets?"

"Ah," said Jimmy, a dark cloud crossing over his face. "The departure is delayed."

"Delayed?" Dash looked confused. "I would have thought Patrick would have hurt himself to get into Krondor as quickly as possible.

The earlier the city is secured, the faster we can turn north toward Sarth and

start retaking the Bitter Sea coast and Yabon."

"There are other issues." Jimmy pulled on his brother's arm. "Come along. Get a bath and we'll talk."

Dash sighed. He trudged along after his brother.

Dash sputtered as Jimmy poured another bucket of hot water over him. "So then he turned you loose?"

"Yes," said Dash, "but I don't think there was a lot of family devotion

in there. What I saw looked like a pretty pathetic bunch, and I suspect he

knew that killing me would protect very little, while turning me loose

might actually gain him something."

"Well, if Duko doesn't turn out to be the grandfather of liars, we won't need the Mockers' help getting into the city."

"I'm for that," said Dash. "I've seen enough bloodshed to last me the rest of my life."

Jimmy put down the bucket and handed Dash a towel as he climbed out of the bathtub. A servant had laid out clothing on the bed and

left the brothers alone. Dash toweled dry, and said, "Does it bother you?"

"The killing?" asked Jimmy.

Jimmy shared the humor. For his smile faded. "Given what we've seen in the last two years I'm disinclined to t fal t hi G father told us."

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Dash nodded. "Do you ever ask yourself why we do these things?"

"Almost every day," said Jimmy.

Dash pulled on his shirt. "Good, what's the answer?"

"Because we go where duty calls us."

Dash stepped into his trousers. "Duty?" He reached for his boots and

sat on the bed to pull them on. "These aren't as good as the ones I lost in Krondor."

"They were the second best pair you brought with you from Rillanon; I checked your wardrobe."

Dash nodded. "Anyway, Grandfather always talked of duty, but I saw

where he grew up, firsthand, and I have no idea why he felt that way."

"What way?" asked Jimmy. "I'm not sure I'm understanding you."

"I mean he felt so deeply his duty to the Kingdom. Those Mockers I talked to looked at it as you or I might look at taking vows to serve Sung."

"Celibacy was never high on my list of virtues," admitted Jimmy.

"That's what I mean. Grandfather had Father as deep into the idea of King and Nation before we were born as if he was teaching a religion.

I,M just at a loss to wonder how Grandfather got that way."

Jimmy looked at his brother as he finished dressing. "Interesting question.

imagine. "

Turn traitor?" He stopped and said, "I can't imagine what it could be. Perhaps some sort of perfect love . . ." He shook his head. "No, because

I can't imagine any woman who loved me turning against something I hold that dear."

"speaking of women, did I see a page hurry by wearing the livery of Silden?"

"Yes, you did," said Jimmy with a grin.

"Is Francie here with her father?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yes."

"And does she still have that crush on you?'Y

Jimmy's grin widened. "I hope so." He laughed. "We had lunch the other day. She's turned out just as you might expect."

Dash opened the door and said, "If memory serves she was obnoxious and beat you up with some regularity."

"No," said Jimmy, stepping through the door. "It was you she beat up. I was too big. Beside, she fancied herself in love with me."

"Well, then, back to the point, is there something diere?"

Jimmy walked down the hall with his brother. "Seriously, I don't know. I suspect, however, I may have nothing to say in the matter, nor

will Francie."

"Patrick?"

"That's the delay I spoke of. Suddenly Dukes are winging their way like birds in migration toward Darkmoor."

"All with eligible daughters?"

Rounding a corner, moving past guards standing at their posts, Jimmy said, "I think the King worries that with war coming, another heir might

prove valuable."

They climbed the steps in the main hall that led to the Baronial great

hall

Nobles had been trickling into Darkmoor since the thaw, and now the modest Baronial hall was packed to the point of overcrowding. Dash said,

"I 'We'd better take Krondor back just so we can get into a hall big enough to hold this lot."

Jimmy said, "Shhh." He pointed to where their father stood next to the Prince. It was the most formal-looking court they had witnessed so

far in Darkmoor, for Patrick wore his purple mantle, his ermine stole, and

his circlet of gold. Arutha was likewise attired formally in a black tunic

with golden trim, scarlet leggings, and his chain of office, with his Ducal

seal hanging from it. At his side he wore the sword once borne by his namesake, carried by Erik von Darkmoor to Arutha.

The brothers waited at the rear of the hall as the Prince disposed of the day's business. Then a young page announced, "This day's court is at an end, my lords and ladies."

Patrick stood and everyone in the room bowed. As the Prince departed, Arutha saw his sons and motioned for them to join him.

They crossed the still-crowded court, and when they reached the dais upon which the throne was placed, Arutha hugged his younger son. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you."

"Of course you can," quipped Dash.

Arutha said, "Come, you must fill in the Prince on what you learned in Krondor."

Dash followed his father and brother into the Prince's private office.

Nakor said, "Do you think they'll get tired of this?"

The chaos which followed seem to amuse Nakor, though Pug was
disturbed by the attempt to kill them without conversation. They
appeared

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two relatively helpless men, unarmed and alone. Their own horses h
panicked at the onslaught of the Saur riders, the massive horses
bearing
down like a rolling tide.

Pug had allowed his and Nakor's mounts to flee before putting up his
barrier, and now he regretted the decision. They were without the
food
and water in the saddlebags, with nothing for sustenance except for
Nakor'

s seemingly inexhaustible supply of oranges.

He produced one, split the skin, and began to devour it. "Want one?"

"No, thank you; maybe later," said Pug. "This shield spell is more
than adequate to keep them out, but I do have to spend a little
energy

keeping it intact."

"It's a good thing they don't have any spellcasters along, isn't it?"

"Things could get a little difficult," agreed Pug.

Nakor squinted and said, "Then things might get difficult soon." He
pointed to the distant horizon beyond the milling, angry riders who
were

Sha-shahan of all the remaining Saaur.

The young warriors fell silent as their leader reined in his mount.

The

leader jumped down from his horse and walked to stand just inches the

other side of the energy barrier. "Why have you humans come to

trouble

the Saaur?" he demanded.

Pug glanced at Nakor, who shrugged.

Pug looked at Jatuk and said, "Why do you war upon us, Sha-shahan

Of all the Saaur?"

"I make no war upon your kind, Black Robe."

"There are three hundred dead soldiers of my King back there who

would argue that," Pug replied.

"If they could still argue," Nakor added.

"They refused to depart," said Jatuk. "They were told we claim these

grasslands. "

Pug said, "If I lower this barrier, may we talk?"

Jatuk waved his hand in agreement. "We camp here!" he shouted,

and instantly the fifty or so riders surrounding the two humans

dismounted

and started to organize a camp. Several led horses away and

drove stakes for pickets while others began building fire pits. Still

others

rode off toward a nearby river, to carry water back.

Pug let the barrier lapse, and Jatuk said, "I remember you, Black

Robe. It was you who brought me Haman's dying words, of our betrayal

at the hands of the Pantathians. I will speak with you in truce, and

you

may leave freely when we are done."

"Me too?" asked Nakor.

Jatuk didn't deign to answer, merely waving away the question as he

turned his back on the pair. He walked to his horse, held by another

Saaur

in setting up camp. He reminded himself these were originally a nomadic people, who despite having constructed great cities on their homeworld of Shila, had remained nomads at heart. The majority of the Saaur roamed the great grassy plains of Shila, thousands of horsemen and their families and herds accompanying them on their endless trek. A demon attack had ended that great civilization. Of the millions of Saaur who had dominated their homeworld at its height, less than ten thousand had survived on Midkemia. Pug assumed that the last few years of warfare had kept their numbers low, but knew they were a people facing a grim future if they couldn't find a respite from warfare. A fire was built and Jatuk motioned for Pug and Nakor to join him. His reptilian face was surprisingly expressive, and the more Pug watched those giant warriors the easier it became to see individual differences. A warrior took the role of Jatuk's servant, providing him with a wooden bowl of water for him to refresh himself with. He washed face and hands, and at the end ran a damp towel across the back of his neck. That gesture was the most reassuring thing Pug had seen of the Saaur, for it was the most humanlike display he had seen that didn't involve bloodshed. While traveling through the destroyed world of Shila with the spirit of the last Lore Master of the Saaur, Haman, Pug had come to learn a lot of the people of that world and their history. He doubted human and Saaur could ever be close friends on Midkemia, but he thought with some

nothing but death and loss since coming to this world." He motioned to the northeast, up the vast Thunderhell. "This is land we understand. There

are rolling plains, water, the cattle we have taken thrive here."

Pug nodded. Then he said, "But it is not your land."

"This is not our world," said Jatuk bitterly. "So we must take what we can." He gazed to the south. "You have suffered, you humans of the Kingdom, and I now understand that it was through no fault of yours that

we were brought here. But we have no means to return home, and even if we could, what would we find there, Black Robe?"

"A burned-out world populated by starving demons, hunting one another down for food until only one is left. In time, it will starve and wither.

Finally, it will die."

"So there is nowhere to go.

Pug said, "Perhaps there is."

Jatuk looked at Pug and said, "Where?"

"I don't know yet, but Midkemia is a big world. Here the grasslands appear vast, but you know your own history. Once your forebears were as you are now, a small band abandoned upon Shila by the Valheru called

Alma-Lodaka."

Despite having learned the truth of their "goddess's" nature in the last year, old habits died hard, and the older Saaur bowed their heads in

reverence at the Green Mother's name.

"But over the ages," Pug continued, "your nation grew until you had conquered the entire globe. You and your children may be content to wander the Thunderhell, to fight the nomadic tribes that already claim

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"I understand," said Pug. To himself he added, Now if I can only get Patrick to understand. He pushed that thought aside as food was put before Nakor and him, and decided the opportunity to learn more about the Saaur was too good to ignore. He would worry about Patrick's reaction when he returned to Darkmoor in the morning.

Patrick said, "You did what?"

Pug said, "I gave them assurances we would aid them in relocating out of the Kingdom after we disposed of Fadawah."

"But they agreed to leave?"

"Yes, if we can find them a reasonable alternative."

"Find them an altemativel" Patrick shouted.

The II court was about to commence, and the Prince was holding an impromptu interview with Pug, Nakor, Arutha, and his sons. "Those monsters killed three hundred of my men!"

Arutha said, "A misunderstanding, Highness."

"A misunderstanding?" Patrick appeared unconvinced. Turning to

Pug he said, "Why did you disobey me? I ordered you to destroy them if they wouldn't quit the Kingdom at once."

Pug was growing tired of the young Prince's manner. "Highness, I am not an executioner. I have fought for the Kingdom, but I will not use

my powers to destroy an entire race because you are piqued."

"Piqued!" Patrick's temper exploded. "You dare to talk to me in such a fashion?"

greatest ally, or your worst enemy." Patrick's mouth fell open at the little man's added insult. He looked at Arutha, who only shook his head slightly and said, "We have court, Highness. " Dash and Jimmy exchanged glances but said nothing. Patrick stood motionless for a long minute, then composed himself. "You are right, my lord duke. We mustn't keep the court waiting." As Jimmy and Dash ducked out of a side door, Jimmy said, "Duke

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Pug has a lot of confidence in his ability to persuade the King he's right to embarrass the Prince that way." They walked toward the courtyard. Dash said, "From everything I've heard ... well, it's probably a well-earned confidence." He glanced around. "Look, we both know that Patrick's got a temper. We had enough fights with him when we were children. And we know the King kept him off the throne of Krondor an extra year because he didn't think he was

it's not going to be a pretty one."

Nakor came around the corner. "Ah, there you are. I've been looking for you."

Jimmy grinned. "For what?"

"I need to get some information from you, and if you have what I need, we need to go retake the Abbey of Sarth."

Dash and Jimmy's eyes opened wide at that last statement. "Retake the abbey?" asked Dash.

"If you remember, your grandfather once told me a story about the time he had to sneak into the Abbey of Sarth with that renegade

moredhel
chieftain."

Jimmy looked at Dash. "Do you remember any story like that?"

"No," said Dash. "I thought I'd heard every story Grandfather ever told."

From behind them a voice said, "No, you didn't."

They looked to see Duke Arutha standing there. "But I remember that story.

Nakor grinned. "Subai has a goat trail over the mountains that leads to a little valley down near the base of the mountain upon which the old

Ishapian abbey sits."

Arutha paused for a minute, then said, "So while we're conducting

the business of establishing a court in Krondor, sending armies around

here and there, and while Fadawah's agents are closely watching, you want to sneak over the mountains, find that secret entrance into the

basement

of the abbey, capture and hold it until Greylock can drive up into the town, and secure the area?"

"Something like that, but leave out the 'You' business. Someone a little younger should run this raid." He glanced at the brothers, who

and
Pug knows the same itch, but he's old enough to know that the
quickest
solutions often are the ones with the highest price." He put his
hands on
the brothers' shoulders and moved along the hall with them. "He must
weigh things in his mind, decide where his true loyalties lie."
Jimmy said, "Loyalties lie? He's a noble of the Kingdom; he was
adopted into the royal family."

"But he has larger responsibilities," said Nakor. "Remember, he
didn't just save the Kingdom from destruction; he saved the entire
world
of Midkemia, including all those men on the other side, the Saaur,
any
Pantathians who may be alive out there, the Brotherhood of the Dark
Path, everyone. "

Jimmy said, "But he can't just toss aside his loyalty to the
Kingdom."

Dash said, "Don't be so sure."

"I don't think he's going to toss anything aside," said Nakor as they
walked into the courtyard. "At least not lightly."

Pug popped into view on the bank of a river. "Hello!" he called.

A moment later a voice called back, "Welcome, magician."

"Have I leave to enter?"

"You are welcome in Elvandar," came the reply as a figure stepped
Out from behind a tree.

"Galain!" said Pug as he waded across the sandy ford he always
Preferred to use to enter the elven woods.

The young-by elvish standards-warrior stood with the tip of his
longbow on the ground in a relaxed posture. "I came to watch when
Miranda showed up two days ago. I thought you might come by shortly."

as is
their custom."
"How long ago?"
"Not long, a few weeks. Marcus and his party left the banks of the
river less than two weeks ago."
]Plug nodded. "That would explain why word had not reached us. It
will take weeks more for Marcus to send word by ship to Port Vykor.
The
Prince will not have heard it." He looked at the elf. "Thank you for
telling
me. That one was a true friend, the last save Tomas, from my first
years
in Crydee."
"He was well loved by us all."
"How are the others?"
"Save that loss, all is well." He shouldered his bow and said, "The
Queen is well, as is Tomas. Prince Calin and Redtree hunt together.
Despite
the war to the east of us, the invaders do not try to cross into
Crydee,
so they do not trouble our borders."
"How is Calis?"
Galain smiled. "He most of all is well. Since his birth I have not
known him to be as happy as he is. I think the release of the
Lifestone
has freed him from a dreadful part of his heritage."
Pug said, "I am impatient to see my wife."
"I understand," said Galain, "from what I've seen. So far I have not
had the fortune to meet she who will be my wife."
"You're young," said Pug dryly. "Barely past a century."
I :_ I A 'IT'K;c ;c true " He held uD his hand and said, "I wfll

Pug activated the device he carried and found himself floating above the treetops a half-mile from where he wanted to be. He barely got control

of his powers in time to keep from falling to his death and landed gently.

Feeling shaken, he examined the Tsurani sphere and saw a fading along a portion of it that told him it was no longer usable. He regretted the loss

of the device. His ability to quickly move from place to place was now

gone, until he learned the trick Miranda had of moving at will without aid.

He put it back inside his robe. Several other such devices were being studied back at his island by his students, and another might prove useful.

He remembered the days of free trading with the Empire of Tsurannuani through the rift gates. Now there was only one, at Stardock, closely monitored

on both sides. For a dark moment he wondered if there was anything mankind couldn't make a mess of., not for the last time in his life he cursed Makala, the Tsurani magician whose badly conceived treachery

had caused the estrangement between the two worlds, all motivated by the highest ideals: to serve the Empire.

Well, he thought, dwelling on past failures once you'd learned all there

was to learn was just heaping futility on failure. He put aside reminiscences

and started walking.

A short time later he reached the large clearing that surrounded Elvandar,

in
greeting.
He made his way along the climbing path of steps and branches until
he was at the center of the great elven city. At the boundary to the
Queen's
Court, he found Tathar, the Queen's seniormost advisor, waiting.
"Magician!"
Tathar said, extending his hand to shake in the human fashion.
"It is good to see you again."
Pug said, "It is good to see you as well, old friend. " He glanced
around and said, "It is good to again be in Elvandar." He looked at
Tathar. "My wife?"
"She is with the Queen and Tomas," answered the old advisor.
(Come.))
He led Pug into the heart of the Queen's court, where Queen
Aglaranna,
Tomas, and Miranda were sitting in conversation. Seeing his boy

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hood friend, Tomas rose, but it was Miranda who reached her husband
first. "I didn't think you were coming!" she said, delighted to be
wrong.
"I didn't think I was either," said Pug. "But I had a bit of an
argument
with Patrick-"
"The Prince of Krondor?" asked Tomas. He smiled down at his short

And I remember those impulses all too well, my friend.

Pug allowed Miranda to escort him to Aglaranna's throne, where he bowed and said, "Greetings, My Lady."

"Welcome, Pug."

"I am grieved to learn of a friend's departure," Pug said.

Aglaranna said, "He passed as happy as he could be, given his life. No one can ask more. He bade us good night and never awoke. He was at peace. For one of your race, he lived a very long time."

Pug nodded. "But I will miss him. As I miss all the other friends of MY youth."

"I understand," said the Queen. "That is why you should visit more often. We eledhel abide far longer than you humans." Then considering Pug's and Miranda's age, she amended that to, "Most of you humans, that is."

Pug said, "This is true." Glancing around, he said, "Where is Calis?"

Miranda smiled. "He's not too far away. I suspect, anyway."

Tomas grinned. "There's a woman ... He shrugged and winked.

Pug said, "Calis?"

"One from across the ocean, whom Miranda brought to us. With two beautiful boys who need a father."

"Is it ... serious?" asked Pug.

Tomas laughed. "My wife's people are very different from you and me, Pug. And from my son. He is but half-elf, unique in the world, and

he has spent a great deal of time among humans." Tomas leaned over it,i I

and whispered in a mock-conspiratorial tone, "I think he's taken, but he

doesn't even know he's tasted the hook!"

Tathar laughed and said, "This is true. Among our people we have the recognition, the sudden knowledge that a mate is before you. Not all

Yielding a hand which another who has also not known the recognition.
With Calig and Elien, it is the difficult way. But often it ends in a
love as
profound as the first."

Miranda smiled. "I think I sensed something in her when I first found
her and the boys. I think it will all work out."

Aglaranna turned to an elf nearby and said, "Would you carry word
to my son, please, and have him attend us for supper this evening.

Have

him bring Elien and her sons, too."

The elf bowed and hurried off.

"What brings you to us?" asked Tomas.

"I wished to see my wife," said Pug with a smile. "And I wished an
evening among friends, where the air doesn't carry the memory of war,
smoke, and blood. I wanted a quiet night before I start another
quest."

"A quest?" asked the Queen. "For what do you seek this time,
magician.

"

I need to find the Saaur a homeland," said Pug. "Else we may have
yet another war upon us before we sort out the one already here."

Miranda said, "Well, then, we'll leave in the morning."

"I was going to go alone," said Pug, "but the Tsurani orb is no
longer

working-I almost broke my neck when it left me hanging in midair and
I don't know where I'm bound for."

"So you need me to show you how to get around?""

Something like that."

Miranda smiled. "I don't know if I will."

"What? Why?" asked Pug.

Poking a finger into his chest, she said, "Because I like being able
to

do something better than you."

At that the rest of the Queen's court laughed, and they relaxed as

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Ten

JIMMY FROWNED.

Prince Patrick had just leaned over to whisper something in Francie's ear and she blushed as she laughed. The Duke of Silden pointedly chose to ignore this breach of etiquette. The Dukes of Rodez, Euper, Sadara, and Timons glanced over and returned to their conversations. Their daughters, all resplendent in their finest gowns, allowed their gazes to linger a bit longer before returning their attentions to the various young courtiers at the table.

Dash had to turn away so as not to laugh at his brother's unhappiness.

The hall at Castle Darkmoor was now overtaxed in the opinion of the Prince's Master of Ceremony, a dour man named Wiggins. He had been a clerk in the court of Krondor, but had occasionally helped with state

functions for the old Master, Jerome. Because of that small advantage, he

had been named to the office on Patrick's resurrection of the court in

Darkmoor. He resembled nothing as much as a very nervous bird as he fluttered about the room, from one noble to the next, attempting to insure

Earl; which one he couldn't remember. She was a pretty enough girl in a vapid way, and Dash's amusement at his brother's frustration turned to sympathy. Francie was clearly the most interesting young woman in court, if not the most beautiful, and the time Jimmy had spent with her over the

last couple of weeks had awakened something; at the very least, a proprietary impulse if not something deeper.

Dash knew that neither he nor his brother would be free to follow their heart's call as long as they were in service to the crown. They were too highly born, being the sons and grandsons of Dukes. Jimmy would most likely advance to a similar high office, and Dash would probably end up an Earl if he continued in service.

Which meant neither son would have a great deal to say in the matter of whom they would wed. That detail would be up to their father to a lesser extent, and the King's pleasure to a greater extent.

Factionism in the Kingdom was a way of life, and keeping the two realms closely allied an ongoing problem. The East had the population, the wealth, and the political strength. The West had the natural resources, the potential for growth, and all the problems of a frontier: enemies, disorder, and constant difficulty governing. Marrying off the eligible daughters of one realm to the sons of the other was a time-honored method of keeping the two

him away with a smile, and moved around to where his sons stood. They bowed toward the Prince, who wasn't looking at them, then walked from the table.

Once the three were outside of the hall, Dash observed, "We're going to have to start turning away nobles if they continue to show up."

Arutha said, "More are coming. The court here in Darkmoor is to be as visible and noisy as we can make it. We will find rooms for as many

who arrive as possible, first here, then in the nearby city. The rest will be

quartered outside the wall, in pavilions and campaign tents. There is to

be a month of public celebration."

Jimmy's mouth opened in disbelief. "This can't be true?"

"It is," said Arutha.

Jimmy said, "But we have to finalize our deal with Duke-

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,That's been accomplished. We sent him terms and he replied this morning.

"What arrangement has been agreed to?" asked Dash.

Arutha motioned that they should walk. He headed out toward the central courtyard of the castle. The halls were thronged with pages, servants,

and guards, attending the needs of a score of visiting nobles.

Within a month's time, our former enemy will become Duke of the Southern Marches."

to the Kingdom. I convinced the King that he might be the only
hope for us to keep those men under control and make them Kesh's
problem
rather than our own."
Dash got a calculating expression. "If he's a Duke ... This means he
answers to the Prince, and not to you."
"I have my hands full. And if Patrick has direct control over Duko,
he may come to trust him."
Jimmy smiled. "Yet you will be advising the Prince on all matters
pertaining to the Southern Marches."
Arutha nodded. "And it keeps other political issues in balance."
Jimmy and Dash both knew that meant Duko would be permitted to
appoint his own captains to key locations along the southern borders,
probably gaining titles for them. There were presently more offices
than
nobles to fill them due to the high mortality rate of the recent war
in the
West. Eastern nobles would already be pestering the King for some of
those titles-more to the point, the taxes their lands brought. None
of
those, however, would be willing to venture to the West to directly
rule
them. Absentee rulership was not an alien concept in the Kingdom, but
it was frowned upon in the West. There were too many problems -Queg,
Kesh, the Brotherhood of the Dark Path, among others-to leave the
administration of a Barony, let alone an Earldom or Duchy, to a
bailiff
or seneschal. A few key offices would be given to western nobles'
second
or third sons, so that Duko wouldn't be able to build a structure
beneath
him of only personal retainers.

people. They are vain and proud of their heritage and think of themselves as a people apart. This is why we have seen so little of your mother. There was a bitter note in Arutha's voice neither son had heard before.

They both knew their parents' marriage had been arranged by their grandfather, Duke James, and had been as advantageous to the Kingdom as the two marriages of the last two kings to Roldem's royal daughters.

Dash and Jimmy's parents had always been able to maintain a pose of wedded happiness in public, though the boys both knew the marriage was far from ideal. Only now were they learning just how strained the relationship between their parents truly was.

Dash said, "So it must be a Kingdom bride?"

Arutha nodded. "The King has said so, to me, in private. And it must be an eastern noble's daughter. Preferably one from a Due with a great deal of influence in the Congress of Lords."

"Brian Silden," said Jimmy.

"Borric has determined to let his son have the privilege of liking the woman who is to bear Isle's future King. So there are five likely candidates for the position of Princess."

Jimmy said, "Have you any inkling of who Patrick will ask to wed?"

Arutha regarded his son closely, and said, "Francine will be our next queen. All that remains is the timing. Patrick and she have been friends

since childhood. He genuinely enjoys her company. There have been far worse foundations for state marriages in our time."

Jimmy looked stricken.

"What is?"

"Taking things for granted." Looking at his father, he said,) "Did Grandfather ever ask you if you wanted to serve the crown, Father?" Arutha looked as if this question was equally perplexing as what he had just witnessed. After a pause, he said, "No, of course not."

"Why 'of course not'?"

"Because I was just a boy.,I began, much as you did, running errands for him, then I was given work with the Royal Pages, then the Squires."

"But when you became a man, did he ask if you might wish to do something else?"

Arutha looked at Dash and said, "No. He never did."

"Did you ever consider you might have had a happier life if he had?"

Arutha was silent a moment, then said, "That may be the oddest question I've ever heard, son."

Dash shrugged. "I'm full of very odd questions these days."

"Why did you ask that?"

"Because I'm not certain I wish to continue in service to the crown."

"What?" said Arutha. His tone was a mix of surprise and disbelief.

"What would you do?"

Dash shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps return to Mister Avery's employ.

He is a very wealthy man."

Arutha laughed. "On paper. The King may make good on repaying him by the time his grandchildren are running Avery and Jacoby."

Dash smiled. "If I know Roo, he'll find a way to amass another fortune

before that."

Arutha put his hand on Dash's shoulder and said, "If you wish to be released from service to the crown, I can manage that. But please wait

until after we get Fadawah out of Ylith. We have few enough competent men to serve."

others leave to find work along the Keshian border. By the time Patrick's wedding is over and he returns to Krondor, the city will be firmly in our

hands, without having alerted Fadawah too far in advance that he's lost his southern command."

Dash's expression turned suspicious. "Where in all of this is the Duke of Krondor? Why aren't you leading Patrick into his palace in triumph?"

"I'm needed elsewhere a while longer. There are things to be done only I can see through to the end."

Dash said, "Forgive me if I say that sounds decidedly odd."

"Odd or not, it's true. Now go find your brother and see if he really is in distress. If so, go get him drunk and find a tavern wench to take his

mind off of Francine. "

Dash said, "I'll try," and went off in search of his brother.

Arutha watched his younger son depart and stood lost in thought for a moment, then he turned and headed back to the banquet hall. There was still much that had to be arranged before any of the plans he had set

in motion could continue on to fruition.

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Erik von Darkmoor and Rupert Avery sat at a table in the Charging Boar, one of Darkmoor's better taverns, when Jimmy and Dash entered. Jimmy looked drunk already, and Erik stood and signaled across the crowded common room. "Over here!"

Dash saw him and led a somewhat off-balance Jimmy over to the

unexpected."

Roo nodded. "We would have wagered neither of you would ever be seeking solace in an ale jack because of a woman."

Jimmy said, "It's not that simple."

"It never is," agreed Roo.

Both brothers knew of Roo's involvement with Sylvia Esterbrook, the daughter of a Keshian agent who had played Roo like a flute, causing him to cheat on his wife, compromise his own business, and the welfare

of the Kingdom. He had been, by all reports, a model husband since then,

but they understood his lessons had been hard-learned.

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"So who's the girl?," asked Erik.

"The Duke of Silden's daughter," replied Dash.

"Ah," said Erik, as if he understood. "She's not interested, or ... otherwise engaged?"

Dash looked around the room, "The latter, but it's not widely known."

Erik apparently understood the context of the remark. He stood up.

"I've got to return to the castle." He turned toward Roo and said,

"Give

MY best to Karli. And the children."

"And my affections to Kitty," returned Roo.

"I have room if you don't mind sleeping under a wagon." He laughed.

"Well, young lords, good night."

The barmaid came by again and said, "Would you like something before we close for the night, young sirs?"

Dash said, "Thank you, but no. We'll be on our way."

Jimmy said, "I'm not going back to the palace."

"Fine," said Dash. "But at least let's walk some, so you can pass out in a more agreeable place."

Jimmy's expression brightened. "I know! Let's go see Nakor!"

For lack of any better suggestion, Dash agreed. The two brothers left the tavern, and Dash kept one hand on Jimmy's arm, half-guiding,

half-supporting

as he stumbled along.

Jimmy groaned. His head pounded and his eyes felt as if they were glued shut. His mouth tasted as if someone had tossed in table scraps

a

week earlier and left them to ripen.

"Would you like some water?"

Jimmy forced his eyes open and instantly wished he hadn't, as the pounding, . in his head increased in intensity. Hovering over him was

a

woman's face, and as his eyes focused, he saw the rest of her swim into

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

shape. He lifted his head and got his right arm under himself and reached

out with his left hand.

She placed a water cup in it and he drank. Suddenly he knew it was a bad idea: his heart began to thunder and his skin flushed, and

perspiration

Jimmy, however. You is the same one the old Duke's grandson, isn't it?"
Jimmy nodded. "James, son of Duke Arutha, and yes, Lord James
was my grandfather. They call me Jimmy."

"You can call me Aleta." She studied his face. "A woman?"

He nodded. "I guess."

Glancing him over, she observed, "Well, you're not much to look at
now, but I've seen you in a couple of the taverns I've worked, and
when

you're not drunk or hung over, you're not a bad-looking fellow. I

don't

expect you hear 'no' very often."

"It's not that," he said, rising slowly. "I just found out she's
marrying

someone else."

"Ah," said Aleta, as if she understood. "Does she know?"

"What?"

"That you're killing yourself with ale over her?"

"No. We were friends as children. . . ." He squinted at her. "Why am
I telling you this?"

She smiled. "Because you need to?"

He took another drink of water. "Thank you. I think I'll see what my
brother is doing."

He walked on shaky legs through a warehouse bustling with activity.

When he was almost to the door of Nakor's office, the large outer
doors

to the warehouse swung open and filled it with light. Jimmy turned to
see

a wagon being driven up to and then into the entrance, with other

wagons

behind it.

The door to the office opened behind Jimmy, and Nakor came rushing

Out. "Roo!" he shouted as he passed Jimmy. "You're here with the

food!"

Dash followed and stopped next to his brother. "Are you alive?"

arms of a tavern wench."

"Seems you succeeded with half the order."

"Well, there were a couple of ladies willing to accommodate, but you seemed in no mood."

"I'm a mess," said Jimmy. "I don't really know how I feel about all this."

Dash shrugged. "Maybe that's the best. We've both known since childhood we were to have no say in who we wed. With Father being Duke of Krondor, it's too important we wed for the good of the state."

"I know, but I feel so

"What?"

Jimmy sighed. "I don't know."

"It isn't about Francie, you know," said Dash.

"No?"

"No," said Dash. "If she's the Queen there's nothing to keep the two of you apart; the Gods know the court is well practiced in looking the other way. No, it's something else. It's about you and what you really want."

"I don't understand."

"I don't think I do, really, but it's about you." He looked at the wagon. "I still half expect to see Jason on one of those wagons,"

Dash

said reflectively.

Jason had been an employee of Rupert's Bitter Sea Company when Dash had served there, and had been feeding information to Rupert's rival, Jacob Esterbrook, because of his misguided love for Jacob's daughter. He had died in the war.

dash said, "There's Luis!" He hurried past Jimmy to the second wagon, where Luis de Savona sat next to a woman Dash didn't recognize.

Luis jumped down, and Dash said, "Luis! It's good to see you again."

Luis shook hands with Dash and said, "It's good to see you again,

young Mr. Jamison. I was grieved to learn of your grandparents' death."

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Luis had spent the winter in Salador, overseeing Roo's holdings in the

East while Roo had worked in Darkmoor.

Dash said, "I appreciate that." He then noticed the woman as she climbed down off the wagon. "Mrs. Avery?" he said in wonder.

Karli Avery had been a plain-looking, pale and plump woman. The woman who was stepping before him was slender, tanned, and while still

not pretty, had an alive, expressive face that commanded attention.

"Dash!" she said, taking his hands and kissing his cheek. "How are you?"

"I'm just fine, Mrs. Avery, but you ... you look so different!"

She laughed. "There's been a great deal of work and not much food all winter. Loading and unloading wagons, learning to drive them, caring

for the children. Spending days in the sun; it all changes a person."

"Quite so," observed Dash. Jimmy approached, and Dash said, "You remember my brother, don't you?"

Both said hello to Jimmy, and Dash said, "What of the children, and Mrs. Jacoby?"

"All back in Salador, under Helen's care," said Karli, "only it's no

inspecting

the contents of the two wagons. Other wagons were arriving outside.

Roo said, "Very. I'm of a mind to be early into Krondor; there may be a very large number of skilled artisans and craftsmen among the invaders.

If I can recruit them . . ."

Jimmy and Dash exchanged glances. Jimmy asked, "How do you know they'll be free to work, considering there's a war going on?"

Roo laughed. "I'm not without my sources, and I knew Patrick was going to cut a deal with Duko about an hour after you did."

"Sources?"

"Your father," said Roo, laughing. "He's not quite as evil-minded as Your grandfather, but your father is no slouch when it comes to making sure he has all his resources ready. Besides, I'm the largest single debt

holder on the Royal Treasury, so he has to keep me apprised of what's going on.'

Jimmy said, "Well, then, I expect you'll recover your losses before you're through."

Nakor said, "If he doesn't get himself killed first.

Roo threw Nakor a dark look. "I'm not volunteering for any more hair-brained missions, you can bet. From now on

I'm a conservative fam-

ily man, a businessman who will stay home and look after his holdings."

From nearby another voice said, "After we take care of a little job."

All eyes turned to see Erik von Darkmoor standing nearby. "I came looking for all of you; how convenient

I find all of you together. " To

from
Salador to here."
"I'll send a patrol eastward, looking for him. If he somehow gets here before they find him, please let Duke Arutha know.'
Nakor nodded. "WhY, if I may ask?"

'You can ask," said Erik. "I can't answer. You'll have to ask Duke Arutha. '

Nakor said, "I might."

To Roo, Erik said, "I need to speak with you." He glanced at Luis and Karli, saying, "Excuse me, please."

He led Roo to a distant corner of the warehouse-turned temple, and when they were alone, he said,
,Who do you have still working for you in Sarth?"

Roo asked, ,What makes you think I have anyone working for me in Sarth?"

Erik said, "Roo, it's me you're talking to. Now, who do you have still working for you in Sarth?"

Roo said, "John Vinci. He acts as an independent trader; he specializes

in bringing in contraband from Queg. That's why it's not widely known he works for me."

"Good. We need to visit with him.

"What?" said Roo. "We? Visit?"

Erik said, "We need to see how things are in Sarth before we turn northward. We need to come back with a detailed report before Owen takes the army and moves to crush Nordan in Sarth. We've sent scouts around the area, and most of them have come back, but we can't tell how strong the deployment is inside the town. We need to get inside and look

else. If you were to sneak into Sarth-especially with your friend
Vinci ready to corroborate your story-even if we get apprehended,
you'll
be convincing in your role as the greedy merchant anxious to set up
trade
before his competition does."
"We?"

"I'm going, too," said Erik.

Roo still looked unconvinced. "So you'll be standing beside me on
the gibbet again? Only this time there won't be any Bobby de
Loungville
to haul us to our feet and explain we're being reprieved to serve
the crown.

No, thank you. I've done my service and been pardoned for my
crimes."

"You want to see any of the money the crown owes you, ever again?"

"It's my most ardent hope."

"Then I'd consider this, Roo."

He glanced around. "This isn't the place to talk. Come to the castle
tonight and seek me out in my quarters. I'll explain more then."

Roo said, "For the sake of our friendship, I will, but I'm not going
on any more stone-headed missions, Erik."

The smuggler's boat sailed silently up the coast, hugging as close
inshore
as possible, without shoaling out on the reefs which dotted the
shoreline between Krondor and Ylith.

Roo and Erik had ridden to within a half-day's walk of the coast,
just

beyond a checkpoint Duko had established, and escort riders had taken
the horses back to Owen Greylock's forward position. An unofficial
channel

East, to get married in the royal palace at Rillanon, leaving the command

in the West to Owen Greylock, with express orders to hold where they were, defend where necessary, but to seek no offensive.

Roo had been astonished by the scope of the deception. He had been told by Erik that Arutha's agents were already in Krondor, quietly undertaking

the transfer of power, with as little fanfare as possible. It was

Erik's passionate hope that by the time the Armies of the West were ready to redeploy, not only would the enemy be taken by surprise, but they would

have been lulled into a state of complacency.

A crewman whispered, "We're nearly there. Get ready."

Roo said, "Are you sure this is necessary?~

"Absolutely," said Erik.

The Captain ordered sail lowered and a small boat was put over the side. Neither Erik nor Roo were sailors, but Erik felt competent enough

to row a boat into a quiet fishing village without calling too much attention

to themselves.

The boat was lowered and Erik and Roo shimmied down ropes to get into the skiff, and by the time Erik had the oars in the oarlocks, the

smuggler had his sails up and was putting out toward deeper water.

The current here ran southeast, and Erik was forced to work to keep on course,

trying to come in at a fishing village in a sandy cove just south of Sarth.

Roo said, "Are you all right?"

Erik pulled hard and the boat seem to jump forward. "Everything's

washed down upon him, drenching him to the skin in moments.
The boat wallowed and turned sideways as Erik fought to keep it
pointed at the beach. The boat tipped to the left, then suddenly it
flipped,
and Erik and Roo both were tossed into the water.

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Roo sputtered as he came up, and to his irritation found he was only
waist deep in water. He looked around and saw Erik standing a few
yards

away. The boat, upside down, was being pushed into the sand by the
waves.

Wading over toward Erik, Roo was about to comment on Erik's
boathandling
skills when a lantern a dozen yards away was unshuttered. Men
stood at the edge of the water, visible in the lantern's light;
torches were
lit. Soon, Erik and Roo could see a score of armed men, many with
bows
or crossbows pointed in their direction, facing them from the dry
sand. In
the distance, behind them, the faint outlines of the fishing village
could
be seen.

Roo turned to Erik and said, "Everything's fine?"

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Eleven

common
workers was the assortment of weapons they carried.
Roo said, "I wish we'd have had enough time for him to answer the
note. So I would have known we were to be met."
The smuggler's spokesman said, "As soon as your clothing is dried
out, we'll leave." He glanced out the door of the hut. "Or maybe a
little
damp, because we have to be out of here before dawn."

"Patrols?"
"Not so's you'd notice," said the man. "But there is a checkpoint up
the road we need to pass, and the guards that we've bribed are
relieved
at dawn. You'll go in place of two men who will stay here. We've got
some goods stashed away from our last cargo and we'll have to hurry
to
be in the town before dawn. No one will suspect anything."
Erik nodded.

Roo inspected the clothing and said, "We'll change once we get to
John's. He's sure to have some dry clothing."
Erik sipped the coffee. "This tastes fresh," he said.
"Should be. Got it off a packet boat from Durbin yesterday. It's part
of that cargo we'll be carrying in."
"Keshian ships are putting in here?"

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"And Quegan traders, too," said the leader. "Kingdom ships are
staying
close to Port Vykor and escorting Far Coast traders to and from the
Straits of Darkness." He made a wide sweeping gesture. "Fadawah's got
a few ships left from the invasion, and he's keeping them up near
Ylith.

contacts as well as our own to pull off this counterstrike.

"What's the Prince's plan for that old abbey? If Fadawah's got any brains, it's packed to the limit with enough men to strike down the mountain

and ruin any attack up the coast."

"Arutha's got plans for the abbey."

Roo shook his head. "Every time I hear any member of the royal court has plans, I'm reminded that most of the time we served involved

running very hard from people who were trying equally hard to catch

and

kill us."

Erik said, "That's one way of putting things."

They spoke little for the next hour, as their clothes dried enough to put on. An hour before dawn, the leader of the smugglers said, "We must

go.~y

Roo and Erik quickly dressed, their clothes still slightly damp. They went outside and gathered up bundles of goods, and climbed a steep path

that cut straight up the side of a small cliff behind the village.

Fishermen

were moving down toward the beach where they would launch their boats and spend their day as their fathers and grandfathers had before them.

They took no notice of the smugglers, and Roo assumed the inhabitants of the village were paid a handsome sum to pretend the smugglers were invisible.

They climbed the cliffs until they reached the plateau above, a large stretch of dirt and grass they quickly crossed to reach the road.

They

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or a man on foot could easily negotiate it, but attackers up the road would be forced down to the cliffs on the sea side, where another large barricade was erected, or into thick woods steeply rising up the side of a small mountain, impassable by any but the occasional goat or deer. As they hurried past the guards, the leader of the smugglers stopped and handed over a pouch and nodded, without a word, to a soldier who was equally silent. Then they were past the checkpoint and down the road into the town of Sarth.

The rear door to the storage room closed after the last smuggler departed. It was attached to the back of John Vinci's shop, the second floor of which was his home. A single lantern illuminated the room, which was stacked with small boxes and bundles of goods he would sell in his shop: cloth, needles, thread, iron goods-kettles, pots, and pans-rope, tools, and other necessities for those living in and around Sarth. Vinci turned and said, "Bad news, Roo."
"What?"
"Lord Vasarius has agents in town."

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the
island nation like a native, and traded with smugglers and sea
captains
attempting to avoid Kingdom customs officers.
He had come to Roo's attention when he had gained possession of a
valuable necklace, one which Roo had eventually used to ingratiate
himself
to Lord Vasarius. He had then achieved several profitable trades with
the Quegan noble, leading up to planting a rumor of a treasure fleet
which
had caused the leading nobles of Queg to dispatch their warships to
attack
the fleet of the Emerald Queen as it exited the Straits of Darkness
the
previous Midsummer's Day. The most powerful lords of Queg had seen
the vast bulk of their ships sent to the bottom, the single most
devastating
naval defeat in their history.
Most knew that Rupert Avery of Kronдор somehow had a hand in
this, for while there was no direct line proving he engineered the
ruse,
there were ample reports of rumors started by men who served on his
ships, or who worked for his agents. Without being told, Roo knew he
was a marked man in Queg and that to be discovered outside Kingdom
protection meant his life would be measured in hours, if not minutes.
Even
in the Kingdom he would have to forevermore be vigilant against
assassins
hired by Quegan gold.
Roo looked at John. "I can hide out until we have to depart, if
necessary.
But Erik needs to look around. Can you provide believable cover?"

noticeable as Erik."

"Buy something," said Roo.

John's eyebrows went up. "What?"

"Buy something. A building, a business, a house. Something over on the other side of the town that will let you move back and forth.

Make

Erik ... a builder. Someone you're going to pay to repair -things."

Vinci said, "There are several businesses that are abandoned or for sale. "

"Good, let it be known you're taking the opportunity to seize profit, and are willing to buy whatever anyone has to sell."

"How, by the way, am I paying for this?"

"If you actually have to buy something, John, you'll pay for it as you

always do, with my gold."

Vinci grinned. "It usually comes back with a profit attached."

"True," said Roo, returning the grin. "That's why you're doing so well."

John opened the door to the front part of his store, and the stairs leading up to the living quarters above, and said, "Food Will be here shortly. After you finish, head out that rear door to the shed on the other

side of the yard and get some sleep."

Erik turned to Roo as the door closed. "A builder?"

just pick up some loose wood, look at it, toss it aside, and grunt.

Take along some parchment or paper and scribble on it. Look around a lot. If any of the soldiers start talking like they know something about

carpentry, nod in agreement."

I m down,
Dash stepped between his brother and father and said, "Cal both of you."
Arutha said, "My orders are not subject to your approval, James!"
Jimmy said, "But you, leading a raid ... it's preposterous.) I Nakor and Father Dominic stood nearby, watching the exchange.
Arutha said, "I am the only one here who remembers Father's story about the secret entrance into the abbey at Sarth. I don't remember all of it, but I stand the best chance of having things come back to me as I walk around the base of that mountain."
Jimmy looked at Father Dominic. "Don't you know the way?"
Dominic said, "I know where the door is, in the subbasement of the abandoned library, that leads to the tunnel outside in the hills. I don't know if I could find the entrance from the outside. It's been twenty years since I've even been down to the base of the mountain."
Jimmy was about to speak when Dash said, "What do you want us to do?"
Arutha said, "I need someone in Krondor overseeing the rotation of troops. When Von Darkmoor and Avery get back from their scouting mission at Sarth, I want to be able to strike before Nordan sees the attack coming."
"which is why Greylock is already up at the forward lines getting ready," said Jimmy.
"Yes," replied Arutha. "I'll give you details before you go, but by midday tomorrow I want you on the road west."
Jimmy said, "I don't like this one little bit."
Nakor grinned. "You make that obvious."

good."

"Stay alive, both of you," whispered Arutha.

"You, too," said Jimmy.

The brothers left the room. Arutha turned to Dominic and said,

"What does the Ishapian Temple have to say to us, Brother?"

Dominic, a man nearly eighty years of age, but appearing barely twenty-five due to the healing magic of the Lifestone, said, "Many things,

my lord duke. May I sit?"

Arutha indicated they both should, and Dominic said, "It took some persuasion, but I am living proof of my claims. Besides, I was seniormost

in rank in the West and my words carried some weight."

"And your warning saved your library at Sarth."

"To be frank, that was not entirely providential."

"What do you mean?" asked Arutha.

"I don't think it a breach of trust to reveal it was your grandfather who warned us to be ready to move the library when certain things occurred. "

"

Really?" said Arutha.

Dominic got a perplexed expression on his face. "But what I find odd was when he arrived at Sarth to find me and take me to Seathanon, prior

to our confrontation with the demon, he didn't seem to remember he sent

us the warning."

"Maybe he didn't," said Nakor.

"Why?" asked Arutha.

"Because maybe he hasn't sent the warning, yet."

Dominic said, "Time travel?"

Nakor shrugged. "Possibly. He's done it before."

Arutha said, "You are the most amazing man. What. is the exact purpose of your order, again?"

"TO bring about the restoration of the Goddess of Good, as I told you before.) ~

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"Yes, you are a wonder," said Arutha dryly.

Nakor said, "Yes, I am, aren't I? But I think my little temple will not

be what it needs to be until we find the real head of the order."

"I thought you were the high priest of Arch-Indar," said Arutha.

"Only until the real one shows up. Then I'll return to doing what I do best, traveling and learning things."

"Well, until this person puts in an appearance, what are you going to do?"

Nakor said, "Do tricks, tell stories, provide food, get people to listen

to the message of the Good Lady."

Dominic said, "First must come belief. When people begin to understand

that good flows from Arch-Indar, then they will begin the long task of bringing her back to us."

"I don't pretend to understand everything involved with temple politics,"

said Arutha. "I have read notes left by my father and Prince Arutha, and I get the distinct impression they were privy to secrets that were not

passed along to me."

Dominic said nothing.

"Very well," said Arutha. "I will trust that nothing in this poses a

that
control."
Arutha smiled. "He always claimed he was the best thief in the
history
of Krondor."
"Skill or luck, he recognized it, disarmed a trap, and activated the
entrance. Almost gave one of our brothers a heart attack when he
showed
up inside our library."
Arutha said, "The question becomes how many men to bring with
us.' ~
Dominic said, "I know only a little of warcraft. You must bring a
small enough company that we are not detected while moving through
the mountains and large enough that once inside we stand a good
chance
of securing the abbey."

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"Can you draw me plans of the abbey?"

"I lived there fifty years, Duke Arutha. I can show you every hallway
and closet."

"Good. I will have a scribe visit with you in the morning. If you can
have them finished by the end of the week, I would be appreciative.

If

we're going to be in position to get inside the abbey when Owen
strikes

up the coast at Sarth, we need be on the way up the eastern trail
along

Nightmare Ridge by then."

Arutha said, "At least you've enough sense to put a beard on behind your desk, if you need to catch a nap."

Arutha smiled. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"I'm a gambler, remember? If I missed things I'd be broke or dead."

"Are you coming with us?"

"No," said Nakor. "It sounds interesting, but I think I need to be here. Dominic brings a great gift from the Ishapians. They will share the

power they gain from the Tear of the Gods with us. When we have found the true leader of our temple, we will send him to Rillanon and there he

will be given this power.

"That power will turn my little warehouse into a true temple, where Prayers will be answered, and miracles performed. Men will learn of good

and then help recreate the Good Lady."

Arutha said, "A worthy undertaking." He rose. "If you'll excuse me, Nakor, I do have work. And if you need anything for your temple and I can help before I go, I will do my best."

"Thanks," said Nakor, as he walked to the door. "Come back alive, if You would. A new Duke might not be so willing to listen to me."

Arutha laughed as he opened the door to his office. "Well, as much as I'd hate to inconvenience you by getting killed, I think I would be even

more inconvenienced."

"True. See, it's to both our benefit if you stay alive."

Arutha laughed again as he closed the door behind Nakor. Still chuckling

, he sat back down behind his desk and considered the mountain of work before him. The smile faded as he picked up the first report he needed to review and, after scanning it, placed it in a pile to review with

his clerk in the morning.

He picked up the next piece of paper.

Her color rose in a blush and she looked down at the floor stones. "I should have known your father would tell you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

She looked up at him, and her eyes were rimming with moisture. "I don't know. I didn't know ... how you'd take it. Before I came to Darkmoor,

I thought I knew how I felt about you ... about us. Then when I saw you, and we dined together and those walks together ... I don't know. Things just didn't seem the same as they did when we were children."

Jimmy said, "That's because they're not the same. We're not children."
"

She looked him in the eyes, then impulsively leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "You were always my best friend, Jimmy. I love

you more than any boy I've known. I want you to be happy for me."

Jimmy flushed. "Happy because you're going to be Queen, or because you're going to marry that ass Patrick?"

"Don't be that way," she said softly. "Daddy says someone has to keep Patrick in line, and that's why he wants me to be a strong Queen.

It's one of the reasons the King wants me to marry Patrick."

Jimmy said, "Look, I don't know what to say. I only know that whatever

we want doesn't matter, and that you'll marry Patrick, and I'll marry whoever Father tells me to marry, and that will be the end of that.

It's never been any other way."

She squeezed his hand. "Be my friend?"

He nodded. "I'll always be that, Francie."

to play with me in the palace at Rillanon, and who used to laugh when I beat up his little brother. I'll cherish the time we spent sneaking into all those places we weren't supposed to go. I never forgave you for being boys and getting to do boy things, while I had to learn to be a lady." She sighed. "But I will never be able to fall in love, my dearest Jimmy. And neither will you. Don't mourn for something that never was. Just be my friend." Without another word she released his hand and hurried back down the corridor.

Jimmy stood quietly for a long minute, then slowly turned and resumed his walk down the corridor.

Dash signaled and Jimmy turned and waved. They were a hundred yards ahead of the first column heading into Krondor. A delegation of Duke's men were waiting a mile outside the city and Jimmy wanted the column to wait until an exchange of documents was completed. Jimmy urged his horse forward and rode to a point just before the obvious leader of the group. Jimmy saluted and said, "I am Baron James of the Prince's court." He recognized the man as being one of Duke's captains. Then he remembered his name. "How are you, Captain Boyse?"

The Captain, a muscular man with a long beard and hair, nodded. "Well, Baron James."

Jimmy reached into a pouch sewn into his cloak and pulled a thread, unraveling the top seam. He reached into the pocket and pulled out a

er came place. He shrugged. "What do I know? He pointed to the southwest. "A troop of five hundred men, foot and horse alike, are on the march toward Land's End. We will occupy that fortress by week's end." He smiled. "I understand we may have to dislodge a few Keshians

Dash who have wandered into that town from the desert?"

Jimmy nodded. "Bandits, mostly."

"You've brought the replacements?"

"UP the road," said Jimmy.

"Good." He handed the documents to one of his lieutenants, and said, "I will happily trade this garrison duty for some scrapping along the frontier

. Some of my men are city men, who were carpenters or masons, fishermen and the like, back home, but I was always a soldier." He looked

around as if trying to see beyond the limits of his vision. "Duko's a thinker; he talks about this nation of yours. He tells us this new pledge of loyalty is a good thing." He looked at Jimmy. "I do not know of such things. I am trained to fight and kill and die if needed. But I trust Duko.

He has been my leader for more than half my life, and he was not much more than a boy when I pledged service to him. So, if Duko says we are

now servants of your Prince, and that we fight for this nation we tried to

take last year, then we shall serve your Prince and fight for this nation. I

don't claim to understand it, but I will do as Duko orders, for he is my

General. "

Jimmy nodded. "I understand. And for that reason, he will continue

Several hundred mercenaries from outside the walls had been given employment and sent to the borders to the south. Others were being recruited for escort and garrison duty in the area between Darkmoor and Shamata, replacing soldiers who were being sent to this front. Workers, shopkeepers, and some minor nobles had returned in the last two weeks. Two messengers from Fadawah had been intercepted, and

reassuring reports returned by other messengers, soldiers loyal to Duke already who could be trusted to report only what Duke wanted Fadawah and Nordan to know. I judged it would be only a matter of two or three weeks more before it was obvious to Fadawah and Nordan that Duke had turned coat.

The story that a big wedding in Rillanon would keep the Prince away from the West for a year, and that Keshian would keep the Kingdom from attempting to retake widely circulated. Duke's latest message to Fadawah included a note that a Keshian agent had made preliminary contact with him inquiring about the possibility of formal treaty with the "King of the Bitter Sea," which Duke hoped would keep Fadawah overconfident for a while longer.

Dash turned a corner, heading into a burned-out portion of the city that was far down the list to be rebuilt. The note he had received had been short and to the point. No signature had been affixed, but he had no doubt who had sent it.

Dash worried about the presence of Keshian agents in the city. The

shell of a tavern. As soon as he was inside the fire-blackened

walls, a voice

in the shadows said, "You come alone, Puppy?"

Dash's expression let Trina know what he thought of being called

Puppy. '~ ('I'm alone."

She jerked her head to one side, indicating a door to a rear room. He

moved toward it, and it opened. John Turpin stood in front of the

door

way and said, "Sword."

Dash removed his sword from its scabbard and handed it to him.

"Through there," he said, indicating another door.

Dash moved to that door, and when it didn't open, he

tripped the

latch. Inside he found the Upright Man sitting at a table, a half-

drunk

flagon of water next to him.

"Nephew," he said with dry humor. His voice was as raspy as Dash

remembered.

"Uncle," said Dash with the same dry humor.

"Have you news for me?"

Dash sighed. He sat in the second chair at the table without being

asked. "As you can see, we were not in need of your help in taking

the

city. Duke gave it willingly."

"At no small price, I hear," said Lysle Riggers with a chuckle.i

'Duke

of the Southern Marches."

"There's to be a general amnesty.)~

The old man studied his great-nephew and said, "I don't hear the

'but,' though it is there."

"It's to be applied only to those who fought against the Kingdom, as

they swear loyalty to the crown. It will also be extended to any man

who

brethren who have the death mark on them already, and who are known to your father's constables."

Dash let out a long sigh. "I know, but if they'll serve the crown, they'll

be pardoned for their crimes."

"I'm a little old to serve, don't you think?" asked the Upright Man.

Dash said, "I don't think there's anyone besides myself, Jimmy, and Father who has an inkling of who you might be. And while I'm sure there

is a very long list of crimes for which you might be hung, why bother?"

He looked at his great-uncle and said, "If Grandfather didn't want you

taken, why should we?"

"Your grandfather needed me alive to control the Mockers," said Lysle. "

It may be some time before the Mockers are effective enough to be in need of controlling again." He let out a long, tired sigh. "I most certainly

will not be here to see it. And I do not know if the next Upright Man, or whatever he calls himself, will care to make deals with the crown." He pointed a finger at Dash. "You and your father are clever enough, but once I'm gone, you'll not be able to make demands of the Mockers the way your grandfather made of me."

Dash said, "I know. If you have nothing more, I have a great deal to do."

The Upright Man waved him away. "We're done, Dashel Jamison.

From now on, we are Mockers and you are the Prince's man. If you conic

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and moved into the second room and found some parrot gear. His sword hung over the butt end of a burned-out timber. He retrieved it and moved through the next door. As he expected, Trina wasn't in the outer part of the building either. He left the devastation of the inn and moved away. He paused a moment and tried to remember the name of that particular inn, then it came to him. It had been called the Rainbow Parrot, and it had once been owned by a friend of his grandfather's, a man named Lucas. Caught up for a moment in reflection on old stories of his grandfather, Dash almost didn't hear the footsteps behind him. He spun and had his sword out before the man came within a halfdozen paces. The man coming at him was dressed like a rag picker and was thin and dirty. He came to a halt and, putting up his hands, backed away, then turned and ran. Dash put up his sword and considered that it would be a long time before Krondor was what it once had been. Then as he left to return to the palace, he considered the Poor Quarter was probably safer now than it had been before the war.

Dash reached the palace and was again astonished by the amount of work going on; there must have been a hundred masons at work, most of whom had been soldiers serving in Duko's army before the war. But they were making progress in getting the palace repaired. Other workers washed soot from walls, hauling away rubbish and debris, even hanging

look, gods!
"Yes," said Jimmy as they turned the corner and climbed stairs up

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toward Duke's offices. "And there are other reports coming in. It looks like Kesh has decided to punctuate her demands for concessions with a little show of force."
"Just what we need," said Dash.

Jimmy moved toward the door to Duke's office, knocked once, and opened the door without waiting to be bid enter. A clerk holding a large sheaf of papers, warned by the knock, jumped nimbly out of the way as the door opened. The two brothers entered and found a half-dozen clerks and scribes writing orders and dispatches. They made their way through the press of court officers and entered Duke's inner office. Dash was once again struck by the difference between his office when it was occupied by the Prince and his father, and as it was now, with Duke sitting behind the desk. Before it was the administrative center of the Western Realm, now it was the headquarters of a military organization. Dash and Jimmy now recognized most of Duke's remaining Captains, and all the Kingdom officers who now served. Wendell, a cavalry captain

It suddenly struck Dash that the majority of the Krondorian garrison perished in the destruction of the city; the remaining fragments of the garrison were now serving to the east with Owen Greylock. Owen wasn't due in the city for another five days, just before the time selected to launch the offensive northward.

Duko pointed at the map. "We've got two or three hundred soldiers assaulting our position in Land's End. By this morning's dispatch, they're holding there, but hard-pressed. They may already have fallen. The five hundred foot soldiers I sent earlier this week won't get there for another five days, even if I send a galloper to order a forced march. We also have reports of some ships sailing along the coast toward Land's End, possibly in support of the assault."

Jimmy said, "That makes sense. If they bring up a large force across the Jal-Pur, they have logistics problems. But if they shock us with a

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

smaller force, holding our men inside the citadel, while they land more

troops by sea, they can quickly surround and siege."

"Who's in charge down in Port Vykor?" asked Duko.

"Admiral Reeves," supplied one of the Kingdom officers.

"Send him orders to intercept those ships and drive them off. I don't care if he sinks or captures them, just keep them from landing those men."

Duko smiled and said, "Until your Lord Greylock gets here, I'm assuming command. I'll need your help, young sirs, as I am not all that familiar with this outlying area."

He pointed to a spot on the map. "But I'm guessing that if this Empire to the south is serious, here is where we will see their next push." His

finger was on a small hill pass halfway between Shamata and Land's End. "It's a long run, but it's relatively flat land. If they only seek to put pressure on the negotiations in Darkmoor, then they'll withdraw at the first show of strength. If they are seeking to get into a serious fight, they'll launch a second assault through here about the time they land their ships

at Land's End." Looking at another of his old captains, he said, "Jallom, get scouts down to that pass as fast as possible. I don't even know if we have any soldiers there."

"We don't," said the Captain named Jallom. "We assumed the Kingdom would take care of their southern flank and we wouldn't have to WOI.Iy. v ~

"Well, we're now the Kingdom, and we need to worry. And send word to Greylock about what is going on and ask him if he might consider sending troops that way if they can get there first."

Men hurried to carry out orders, and Duko said, "Gentlemen, we have a war on our hands. It's just not the one we wanted, and we don't

ARUTHA POINTED.

Captain Subai motioned and the man behind him signaled. Another man pointed and nodded. He then started searching in the indicated area.

The progress over the mountains had been slow, as the men on foot could

cover only between ten and fifteen miles a day. But they were now in sight of the base of the mountain atop which perched the former Abbey of Sarth.

Three scouts were moving along the difficult trail, moving up tiny gullies worn by rainwater, small game tracks, anything that might lead to

the entrance. They were looking for a large extrusion of rock that overlapped

the face of the mountain, yet behind which was a long narrow passage, leading to the entrance to the tunnel under the abbey.

Arutha remembered his father telling him that unless you were looking right at

the entrance, end-on to the extrusion, you would only see what looked like mountainside.

They had been searching for days and had twice almost come into contact with Nordan's patrols. Only the fact that Arutha and Dominic were accompanied by the best woodsmen and trail scouts in the Kingdom kept them undetected. There were only six of them in this party. The one

hundred and twenty Pathfinders and Crimson Eagles who were given the responsibility for taking the abbey waited miles away, in a tiny valley, just

beyond the range of invader patrols.

Arutha took a drink of water from the skin he carried. The summer

whistle alerted Arutha that someone had found something. He hurried to where Subai stood and saw a man below the Captain. He had jumped down into a depression where all but his head was hidden by brush; he would be invisible from the trail. Arutha glanced around and his eyes caught sight of a large oak tree, masked by other, younger trees, but directly opposite his position. He turned and saw a large boulder, the size

of a wagon, and at the base were two others-instantly he knew. "We've found it!" he said quietly to Subai.

Arutha motioned to where Dominic stood and jumped down to stand behind the soldier. "There's something on the other side of this brush, Your Grace," said the soldier.

Without saying anything, Arutha took out his sword and started hacking

away the brush. The soldier hesitated a moment, then pulled out his own. By the time Dominic arrived, they had cleared away a significant portion of the undergrowth. Behind the cleared brush was a passage.

Arutha knew it was the place his father had described, because from end-on, it did indeed look like a hallway, between the face of the cliff and a wall of rock. To Captain Subai, he said, "Wait here until Dominic and I find

the entrance."

The cleric and the Duke entered the narrow passage, which ran a full hundred yards along the face of the mountain. At the end, to their

left, a cave large enough for one man to enter could be seen. Arutha said,

"If

the
entrance of the cave. It was without latch or lock. Across it three
large
iron bands showed it was heavily reinforced. Arutha said, "You're
right.
You'd need a heavy ram to knock that down, and there's no room here
to swing it.'

Dominic said, "The latch-"

Arutha said, "Indulge me a moment."

He inspected the area, running his hand above a ledge, and then below
another, and over the surface of the door. Finally he said, "My
father told

me stories of his days as a thief. Often I imagined myself in his
shoes,
doing just this sort of thing, attempting to enter somewhere I was
not

welcome. I wondered if I would be equal to the task." He knelt and
inspected the ground before the door. Off to one side, a small rock
lay

nestled against the overhanging stone wall. Arutha reached for the
rock.

"I wouldn't do that," said Dominic.

Arutha's hand hesitated. He then said, "I must concede I lack my
father's gifts." Smiling, he stood and said, "My grandfather tells me

I
have more of my mother in me than my father. Perhaps he's correct."

"That's a trap, almost concealed. Over there is the true release." He
moved to a small recess and put his hand inside. Feeling around he
grasped a small latch, then moved it. "Now pull that rock."

Arutha did as he was bid and discovered the rock was attached to a
steel cable, by a large bolt at the back. The rock traveled only a
few inches,

up the passage. After nearly a hundred yards, the passage widened into a large gallery, where footprints and signs of recent passage could clearly be seen. Arutha inspected them and said, "These aren't boot marks. These look like sandals."

Dominic said, "We kept books, scrolls, and other tomes stored throughout the mountain, even this close to the escape route." He pointed upward. "But nothing was taken out that way. My brothers quit the abbey in good order, so whatever was kept here was hauled up the mountain, put aboard wagons, and taken to our new abbey, That Which Was Sarth. "Where is the new abbey?" asked Arutha.

Dominic smiled. "For reasons that you may understand more than most, my order has decided that the information contained within that particular abbey is too dangerous in the wrong hands. Therefore, only those within our order know the exact location of That Which Was Sarth.

All I may tell you is that while it is in Yabon, it is safe from Fadawah."

Arutha said, "As an officer of the Royal Court, I am not pleased to hear of this. As the grandson of Pug, I understand."

Boots upon the stone heralded the approach of the first band of Subai's raiders. The man in the van carried a torch and behind him came others holding bundles of supplies.

The timetable was critical. Greylock would begin his approach to

resistance.
From there the fight into the town would be difficult, but if Nordan's forces up in the abbey were to sally forth, Greylock's army would suddenly be caught between a stout defensive position and an army charging down a mountainside. If Greylock turned up the mountain road to attempt to seize the abbey, he would be fighting up a road that at several places narrowed so that only a single wagon or two men on horse could pass, with the town garrison at his back. The Kingdom's only hope was for Subai's force inside the mountain to seize the abbey, or at least tie up the forces within long enough for Owen to take the town. Once the town was in Kingdom hands, the abbey could be isolated and its garrison starved out, or it would have already fallen to Arutha's forces. Arutha considered this as the men started to filter into the chamber. It was possible they would be facing odds as high as four to one. No one knew how many men were billeted within. Nordan had - not seen fit to share that information with Duko. Their only advantage was surprise. The night before Greylock's assault from the south, the Kingdom forces below the abbey would launch their attack. Arutha knew he had the Kingdom's best men for the job, handpicked by Subai. The Pathfinders were trained for resourcefulness. To a man they were tough, resilient, and efficient. The Crimson Eagles were veterans of a series of brutal campaigns, men who would do exactly as needed and without hesitation.

a larger storage room back here, and probably want to widen the gates

so

can get bigger wagons in and out!"

Softly, Erik said, "Keep it down, John. We've been doing this for three days and no one has questioned us so far. Unless they're starting to

think You're getting hard of hearing."

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With a pained grin, Vinci said, "Just trying to be convincing."

"We're done," said Erik. "Let's get back to your shop."

They walked through the surprisingly bustling streets of Sarth. The town was always a fairly busy one, with many fishing villages bringing

their catch to market. It was also an important secondary port between

Ylith and Krondor, one which many traders and not a few smugglers from

Free Cities or Queg visited. Kingdom customs had been more lax there, and as a result the city had quite a large population of people who

were enterprising, irrespective of who was governing, Kingdom or some recent invader.

Armed men were everywhere, yet the mood was relaxed. The merob i I felt the

scenarios from Novindus who were baffled in Sarth v ous y y were far enough behind the lines to not be taken unawares.

Erik and John hurried back to John's business, and moved through

Roo, look at this."

Roo stood and came to where Erik opened up his sketches. He moved them around until they formed a map of the region around the town of Sarth. "You'll need to memorize this, so if you get back and I don't, you can redraw it."

"What are you talking about?" asked Roo.

"I can't risk carrying these." He looked at Roo and John. "If we get stopped, and we're carrying these maps, we're going to be dead before anyone blinks. If we don't have them, we might be able to bluff our way out." He looked at John. "If you hear we are caught, John, you're going to have to try tomorrow night to get down to Krondor."

"Me?" said Vinci.

Roo said, "That's all right, John, It's not going to happen."

"But if it does," said Erik, "you're going to have to carry word to Duke Duko and Owen Greylock." He pointed to the assembled pieces of paper. "Look at this, and remember everything.

"Natural terrain is the enemy," said Erik. his finger showed a point where the checkpoint had been erected. "This is a bottleneck, this gap

where the road runs atop the cliffs above the ocean and hard against the steep hillside. "

Sarth was built north of that gap, where the road swung suddenly

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

westward and through the town. The southern edge of the town was hard against a cliff face, dropping down into a rocky beach where, even at low

Erik said, "I'm no sailor, but I don't think any ship we have can come from the south and make it through the harbor before they can move that ship and scuttle her."

Roo said, "Unless we take her first."

"We?" asked Erik.

"Figure of speech," said Roo with a grin.

Erik shook his head. "We can't get a message down to Krondor and return with a squad to take that ship. Owen will reach Krondor in three

days' time. We need to be down there in two, so we can give him the latest intelligence."

Roo said, "If you stay and use that band of thugs John hired, you could take that ship."

Erik said, "No. Orders. I've got to be back day after tomorrow."

Roo looked at Vinci. "John?"

John held up his hands. "Not me!" He patted his ample gut and said, "I'm an old fat man, Roo, and I never was a fighter on my best day." Then Erik looked at Roo and said, "Would you care to volunteer for one last mission for King and Country?"

Roo frowned. "To what good?"

("You might save the lives of a lot of good men, shorten the war, and regain your lost wealth that much faster." Erik pointed to the northeast

end of town. "If we can chase Nordan's soldiers up the coast and get ships

up from Port Vykor into that harbor, we can resupply and move north that much faster."

Roo said, "How many men do they keep on that ship, John?"

("A light crew, from what we can see. It's been sitting there since '*~'inter. Every once in a while someone rows back and forth between the

Roo scratched his head. "I'm an idiot for this, but I'll tak
for you, Erik. When is Greylock supposed to get here?"

"If he turns northward at sundown in three days, he'll t
dawn of the fourth."

"Three more days in that shed?"

"We've slept in worse," said Erik.

Roo nodded. "Don't remind me," He sighed. "Four days
just before dawn, I'll row out and take that ship."

Erik said, "Good. Now, John, you've got to memorize this
cause you're coming with me."

"Me?" said Vinci.

Erik smiled, and it was a smile filled with menace. "Your choice:
come with me, or take the ship."

Vinci swallowed hard. "I'll visit Krondor."

"Wise choice," said Erik.

Roo said to John, "I need at least a dozen reliable men, twenty would
be better. "

John shrugged. "I can get a dozen. Twenty? I'll see."

"I'll need two large skiffs hidden nearby until it's time to leave."

"I have a warehouse near there. I'll have the boats taken there
tonight.

Roo said, "Well, then, I guess it's decided. *At least it will be
over in
five more days."

"With luck," said Erik.

His finger stabbed at the road leading from the town to the abbey.

"If

Arutha and his company can neutralize Nordan's forces up there. From
the lack of troops down here I must assume he's got at least three or
four

abandoned
library at Sarth. Dominic had estimated that as many as a thousand
men
could be housed at the abbey if they filled every empty chamber, even
though the dormitory in the abbey itself was built for only forty
monks.

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They had calculated that stabling of horses dictated that the
majority

of soldiers in the abbey be foot soldiers, as no more than forty or
fifty
horses could be crowded into the courtyard of the abbey. The problem
of
providing fodder for the horses, and wagons full of hay or grain
every

week, probably kept the number down to a couple of dozen animals.
They had reached the second level of halls below the abbey proper

before encountering any soldiers. Through the door at which Arutha
listened

they heard voices in casual conversation. Arutha moved back to
where Dominic waited, and whispered, "Is there any way around this
room?'"

Dominic shook his head and quietly replied, "If we go back down
two levels and return up the other side, we'll still come into that
room,
but through a different door. There are three doors, the third being
to a
stairway to the level above."

which I could get a look and see how many soldiers were there.
Dominic said, "We could chance one late at night, when they're all
asleep. "

Arutha turned to a soldier and said, "Tell Captain Subai I want him
to send half the men back down two levels, and up the other side, to
the
second door into this chamber ahead." The soldier saluted and hurried
off to carry out his orders. To Dominic, Arutha said, "It occurs to
me

we've encountered no barriers to the lower chambers, but this door or
the
other may be blocked. I'd not want this raid to fail because someone
moved a bunk in front of this door. Whoever gets in first can insure
the
other door is quickly opened."

Dominic nodded. He glanced over at the soldier holding the sand
clock. "Another day and a half."

ROO waited impatiently. The last two days had dragged, moment by
moment, second by second, until he thought he would lose his mind.
Then

suddenly it was time to leave.

He looked at the men John had rounded up. There were sixteen of
them. All looked disreputable, but none looked particularly fearsome.
Still,

he had seen enough harmless-looking men who turned out to be killers
in

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steer us
for open water." Glancing at the other men, he said, "The rest of
you,
do whatever those three tell you. If we take that ship, I want to be
able
to get underway if anyone on shore tries to help." To himself he
silently
added, and get the hell away from Sarth if the attack fails.
"Ready?" he asked, and the men nodded. "Once we start moving,
don't stop for anything unless I tell you or we're attacked." He
opened
the door to Vinci's store, and said, "Lees go."
The men followed Roo into the predawn gloom, down the street
where Vinci's store sat, then around a corner that put them on the
main
street through the town, part of the King's Highway. They followed
it,
moving quickly without running, and when the road turned north again,
they followed a smaller street that led down to the southern end of
the
docks. To Roo's mind, Sarth looked like nothing so much as a right
hand
slapped down on an otherwise northwest-running shoreline. The thumb
was where the road turned west for a while, and the bulk of the town
rested between, until the road turned north up the index finger. The
docks
started at the crook of the thumb and followed the highway for a
distance,
with several blocks of houses between the highway and the bay.
As they reached the docks, Roo found Vinci had instructed other men
to leave the warehouse unbolted. It was the last one on the lower
dock,

sky and water. As they neared, Roo felt a cold chill in his stomach.

Softly
he said, "Damn."

"What?" asked a man nearby.

"It's a Quegan trader."

"So?" asked a second man.

"Nothing," said Roo. "I'm in enough trouble with Queg that a little more won't make me any more dead if they catch me."

A low cackle from a third man answered the remark, then the man said, "No, but it might make your dying a little nastier."

"Thanks," said Roo. "That makes me feel so much better."

The first boat reached the stem of the ship, a two-masted trading vessel. A man in the bow of the first boat leaped to a rear anchor line and

nimbly climbed to the gunwale. He peeked over, turned, and nodded down to those in the boats below.

Silently, men started climbing aboard.

Up on deck, the sailor assigned the night watch sat against the rail sleeping. Roo motioned, and one of the men struck the sleeping sentry hard on the head with the hilt of a sword. The man slumped over, unconscious.

Roo motioned for the men to move fore and aft, and down into the

ship they went. Things were quiet, then suddenly a shout from the bow of the ship sounded, answered quickly by the sound of blows. Other voices

were raised, then it was quiet again. A minute later a group of downcast

about you. Who are you?"

The man remained silent. Roo said, "Light a lantern."

One of the smugglers did so and brought it over. Roo held it close.

"I know you! You're one of Vasarius's men. Your name is Velari."

The man politely said, Avery.

Roo laughed. "Don't tell me this is one of Lord Vasarius's ships?"

"It is," said the high-placed servant. He had been the first Quegan to

meet Roo on his first visit to that island.

"Isn't that something," said Roo. "Well, I'm sure Vasarius is holding me personally responsible for every injury done him since I last saw him,

SO this additional offense won't surprise him."

Velari said, "He'll eventually find out, Avery."

"You can tell him," said Roo.

"Me? Aren't you going to kill us?"

"No reason to," said Roo. "In fact, we're doing you a favor. Sometime in the next few hours a full-scale war is about to erupt around here, south."

"War?" said Valari

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and by that time I plan on being safely out of this harbor and on my way

"Yes, the very one . you were told was the signal for you to Ank this ship in the harbor.

"Sink this ship?" said Valari. "My would we do that?"

the saying, "Now, what are you waiting for?"

Again the man looked at Roo but said nothing. Roo pulled his dagger and held it before Valari's eyes. "Would you speak better if parts of you were missing.

"We're waiting for another ship."

"What ship?"

The man was silent until Roo put the point of the dagger in the meat of Valari's shoulder and started to push, slowly increasing the pressure so

that it became painful quickly, without doing serious damage.

Valari winced, then his eyes watered, then he cried out. "Stop it!"

he

begged.

"What ship?" asked Roo, letting the point dig deeper. He knew it was a light wound, but he also sensed that Valari wasn't a man who knew that and was not used to enduring pain.

Valari sobbed, "My Lord Vasarius comes to Sarth."

"Vasarius! Here?" said Roo, wiping his blade and putting it away.

'Why?

"To escort us back to Queg."

Roo stood up, eyes wide. Turning to the leader of the smugglers, he said, "Get ready to raise sail. If I shout to get underway, I want to be

moving by the time I'm back up on deck."

Roo hurried to a hatchway and half-jumped down the companionway to the lower deck. He ducked through a low door into the main cargo

hold and saw crates and sacks lashed down along both sides of the hold.

He grabbed a large sack and tried to lift it. It was too heavy to move. He

used his knife to cut loose a small cord tied around the top of the sack,

expensive
circable recognizing riches? Gems, coins, jewelry, a bale of
silk, all had been haphazardly dumped into the chest and it had been
nailed shut.

Roo knew what he had stumbled across; it was the booty of Krondor
and Sarth, boxed and stored aboard this ship to send to Queg. As he
made
his way back up to the deck, Roo began to wonder. Why would General
Fadawah be sending riches to Lord Vasarius?

He saw sails falling from the yards and his appointed man on the
tiller
as the ship slowly began to move forward, toward the mouth of the
harbor.

Roo moved to stand before Valari and said, "What is Fadawah buying
from Queg?"

If Valari had any inclination to refuse to answer, it fled when Roo
produced the dagger and showed it to him. "Weapons! He buys weapons."

"

"

What weapons?"

"Swords, shields, pikes, and bows. Arrows, crossbows, and bolts.
Catapults
and ballistae. And fire oil."

"And it's being shipped here?"

"No, it is already delivered, to Ylith. But the gold was here and
Fadawah
arranged for it to be secretly stored on this ship."

"Why wasn't it guarded better?" asked one of the smugglers nearby.

"I mean, if we had known, we'd have taken this ship ourselves, days
ago!"

"Because guards would have called attention," said Roo. "They
circulated
a rumor it was a blockade ship, to be sunk in the harbor mouth."

...y, no is as sea.
. One of the men got a calculating look and said, "Why shouldn't we
Just split it up? We don't work for you, Avery."
Suddenly Roo's sword was out of its scabbard before the man could

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SELKRDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

react. The point touched the man in the throat and Roo said, "Because
I'm the only real soldier on this ship, and you copper-grubbing thugs
are
getting a chance for some real gold. Why die so a few of you can
share
this, when you can live and get enough to keep you drunk for the rest
of
your life?"

"Just asking," said the man, backing away.
"Besides," said Roo, "Vinci knows each of you, and if I don't make
it alive back to Krondor and you show up anywhere in the West with
gold, he'll know to send assassins after you.yy
That was a bluff, but Roo didn't think any of these smugglers were
smart enough to suspect it was. He turned and shouted, "Get as much
sail on as you can once we're out of the harbor. And find a Kingdom
banner if there's one in the Captain's cabin and hoist it aloft! I
don't want
to get sunk by one of Reeve's attack ships before we can explain
we're on

The Captain said this ship without willing as all.

The Captain said, "At this speed, not very."

"So we either slow down and get overtaken, or we turn south and shoal out."

"Yes," said the Captain with a smile.

Roo looked toward the canvas and saw the luff of the sail. He was not a true sailor, but he had served aboard ship on two long voyages down

to Novindus. To those sailors aloft, he said, "I'll give every man here a

thousand pieces of gold if we get away from that galley!"

Quegan sailors were often pressed into service, and none were known particularly for deep loyalty to their Emperor. Suddenly the activity above

increased to a frenzied pace as Roo shouted orders. The Captain realized

he was in the presence of a man who knew his way around a ship and said, "We can heel hard to port in a few moments and if we hold tight into the wind, make it clear of rocks, Mr. Avery."

Roo looked at the Captain and said, "Switching sides?"

"For twelve years I've sailed for my Lord Vasarius, and if I've made a thousand gold pieces in that time, it was barely."

"Good," said Roo. "For the Captain, two thousand. Now get us out of here."

The Captain shouted orders, and turned to take the tiller away from the man Roo had assigned to the job. Valari said, "What about me?"

Roo said, "Can you swim?"

"Yes, but--"

Roo nodded to the powerful-looking smuggler who had just released the tiller, and the man grabbed Valari by the collar and the seat of the pants, and with two steps pitched him over the side of the ship. As the

The Captain said, "If we run out of wind before they run out of slaves,

no. If they run out of slaves first, yes."

Roo said, "I hate to do it to the slaves, but let's pray for wind."

The Captain nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Nardini," said the Captain.

"Well, Captain Nardini, I used to have a fleet, and I expect to have one again. If we live through this, not only will you get your gold, I'll

give you a job."

"That would be nice," said the Captain, a balding man of middle years. "I've never been farther into Krondor than the docks. I was last

there about three years ago."

"It's changed since you were there," said Roo.

"So I hear," replied the Captain.

Roo looked rearward and saw the galley was holding steady about two hundred yards off their stern. They had come around the thumb, as Roo thought of it, and the coast fell away to the east, leaving them in

relatively open water.

Roo knew that a support fleet was due to hit Sarth at noon, and hoped they reached it before Vasarius's war galley reached them.

Arutha whispered, "Try the latch."

The soldier nearest him quietly moved the latch up and the door opened. There was a faint squeak, but no one inside the room seemed to

notice. He followed the first man into the room and glanced around in

was littered with a dozen empty sleeping pallets, while another six were occupied. With a hand signal, Captain Subai indicated they were to be subdued and they were. Soldiers entered from the second door and Arutha smiled as he whispered, "Well, it seems I owe those soldiers an apology; that was a lot of stair climbing for no good reason." Subai said, "They understand." Arutha turned to locate Brother Dominic. The cleric wore a helm and breastplate, but carried no sword. He only sported a dull cudgel. He had said that his order would not permit him to spill blood. Breaking heads, Arutha had observed dryly, was permitted, however. "what now?" Dominic said, "There is something. . . "What?" ("I don't know. A presence. . . " Arutha said, "A presence?" "It's something I've felt before, but fainter, more distant." "What?" urged Arutha. "I don't know," whispered the cleric. "But whatever it is, it is not good. I should lead the soldiers up the stairs. If it is magical or mystic, I may be able to protect us." Arutha nodded, frowning. Since the death of the Pantathian Serpent Priests and Pug's destruction of the demon Jakan, there had been no reports of any magical activity among the enemy. The possibility that some agency of darkness had hidden among them and was now about to manifest itself bothered him. But there was no turning back. Dominic mounted the stairs and Arutha, Subai, and the soldiers followed.

six mercenaries were held as in the lowest chamber, to join the three men captured.
"This can't last," said Subai quietly.
As if his words were prophetic, at the top of the next flight of stairs

they were spied by two men walking down the corridor. As soon as they saw the black uniforms, the mercenaries knew there were Kingdom soldiers

in the building. They raised alarm, and Arutha shouted, "Every man to his position!"

Each man knew his assignment. There were a dozen key positions throughout the abbey, and if the Kingdom forces could secure them, the

invaders would be isolated from the town below. While Arutha and his men might be forced to eventually withdraw back down the stairs into the

lower chambers of the abbey, they could keep the garrison up here from

mounting a counterattack down the mountain to relieve the garrison at Sarth.

Sleepy mercenaries came stumbling through doors on both sides of the hall, and Arutha found himself fighting for his life. He had never

fought in combat before, and until this moment had harbored a deep fear

he would not be up to the task. He anticipated shame that he could not

serve his King the way his father and sons already had. Yet now, without

hesitation, he was coolly engaging a man intent on killing him. He had

the stairs. Fighting up the stairs would be difficult, as the
advantage of
height would make this a difficult contest.

From behind a voice shouted, "Down!"

Without hesitation, Arutha fell to the floor, ignoring the pool of
blood

in which he lay. A flight of arrows sped by overhead, and the three
men

upon the first step of the stairway fell. Before Arutha could rise to
his feet,

men were racing past him, their boots pounding on the stones of the
steps

as they hurried up to engage the enemy on the next level.

Arutha knew he was one flight below ground level. Above them stood
the abbey, the stable, the outbuilding, and the walls. If they could
get to

the tower above the abbey, and command positions atop the walls, they
could win the day.

Arutha took a deep breath and charged after the soldiers in front of
him.

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Erik charged.

infantry rather than cavalry. As his men reached a point just beyond the enemy's bow-fire, Erik ordered a halt. The men reined in and dismounted, one man in five taking the horses to the rear. The rest formed up on Erik's command and ran the last hundred yards to attack the enemy lines. Erik knew the key to taking this side of the line was to strike hard and fast at the upper portion that abutted the hillside. It was a series of shallow trenches and offered little protection for the defenders. Once they were in those trenches it would be easy to get behind the rest of the enemy line, root out the bowmen in the trees, and surround the men in the other

trench locations.

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As he had anticipated, it took his men less than an hour to completely subdue the defenders on the right flank. Seeing things were in hand, Erik returned to get his mount and ordered the rest of his men forward while a handful remained behind to escort prisoners back to the stockades being

erected for holding captives. ;tl~bnllt a hitch.

Everywhere the first phase of battle was moving on. Erik had expected stronger resistance on the left flank, the section of the defensive line between the road and the sea cliffs, but the rapidly

gave thanks that Sarth wasn't a walled town like some of the others in the Kingdom. He impatiently waited for his command to re-form, as the standing order was to move as fast into Sarth as possible. When they were mounted, he gave the order and they advanced. Units of archers were hurrying along on either flank, their orders to flush out snipers in the woods. They were supported by squads of swords

men. Heavy pikemen, who would be critical to break any counterattacks, were hurrying along the road, and Erik had to order them to halt, so that his horsemen wouldn't be stuck behind the slower-moving footmen. When everyone was assembled, Erik signaled the advance, and the men moved out. The pikemen fell in behind the horses, and the march was resumed.

The hillsides echoed with the sounds of shouts and screams, the hum of arrows through the air and the sound of steel clashing. But it was obviously a mopping-up action here, and the heavy fighting would be ahead.

Erik motioned for his men to advance at a canter, and they began leaving the infantry behind.

Erik had reached Krondor without incident, he and John Vinci having slipped through the gap to the smuggler's cove, then by boat to a fast ship

heading down to Krondor. They had reached the city in time to give Greylock the detailed layout he had needed.

The next morning advance scouting and infiltration units had been sent out to destroy Nordan's forward positions. The units Greylock had

as possible in the town should Lord Murcha's imprisonment of the
abbey
fail and Nordan launch a counteroffensive from up that road.

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Glancing toward the sea, Erik saw sails in the distance, two ships
heading south. He wondered if they might be invaders' ships or
Quegans.

Either way, they were about to run headlong into a fleet of ships
from

Port Vykor heading to Sarth to support the land advance.

Erik returned his attention to the matter at hand.

Roo said, "They're gaining. Captain Nardini said, "Morning breeze is
freshening, but whoever's
galley is willing to kill slaves, that's the truth."
in command of that

Roo said, "Any weapons aboard this ship?"

"Only what you brought with You. The plan always was to just look
harmless and slip out of the harbor without anyone suspecting we had
all

that gold aboard." The Captain glanced backward and then returned his
attention to the sails above. "We certainly have no ballistae or
other war

engines, if that's what you're asking."

"That's what I was asking," said Roo.

Slowly the galley pulled nearer Roo's ship.

"Sails ahead!" shouted the lookout.

'Where away?" questioned the Captain.

does."

Nardini looked perplexed. "There shouldn't be enough ships in Queg to make up a raiding fleet. A few of the richer nobles, like Vasarius, have a single galley, one they didn't send on that big raid last year, but if there are five other warships left in Queg, I'd be shocked. A dozen or so are under construction in Queg, but they won't be ready to launch for at least another month."

"Then who belongs to that second fleet?" asked Roo.

Nardini shrugged. "We'll find out soon enough."

Roo said, "I wish I had your calm. ~)

Nardini said, "Well, truth to tell, if you get free, I'm a rich man.

If you get caught, I was your prisoner."

Roo had to admire the Captain's poise. But his perverse nature demanded

he spoil it. "Well, if Vasarius catches us, I hope I live long enough to hear you explain to him how you managed to let us capture your ship."

The Captain's face drained of color. "Put on every inch of sail you can" he shouted aloft.

Roo laughed.

The Captain continued calling out orders to the men aloft as the two fleets bore down on the ship. Roo called to the lookout, "As soon as

you can identify that fleet off the starboard, sing out!"

"Yes, sir!" replied the man aloft.

Roo found it impossible not to look continuously astern, to attempt to measure in his mind the progress the galley behind was making. In

his

Vasarius
himself."
Nardini said, "Then we had better pray that the wind picks up or
more slaves die quickly, for we are unlikely to encounter mercy at
his
hands.

"I've found the man lacks any sense of humor, myself."
Nardini said, "I've never had the pleasure of any social encounters."
"With luck, you won't anytime soon," said Roo.

From aloft the lookout shouted, "Kingdom ships to the starboard!"
Roo raced to the bow of the ship and looked. After a few minutes, he
could see that both squadrons heading toward him were Kingdom ships.
He whooped in joy and turned to shout to the Captain, "Which can we
reach first?"

From the rear of the ship, the Captain shouted back, "Those to the
starboard are closer, but if we change course toward them, we will
lose
sixed.yl

Roo didn't debate. "Just keep as much speed as you can and let
Vasarius
decide who he wants to fight first."
Roo heard a crash. He ran to the stem of the ship and saw the Captain
cowering over the loose tiller, letting the high sterncastle shelter
him.

"What was that?" he asked Nardini.
"A ballista bolt! Vasarius seeks to slow us down."

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"Or he's mad enough to sink his own treasure ship before he lets it
get away."

Looking over his shoulder, where men worked frantically or watched
in fear, he shouted, "Do we have a bow on this ship?"

the rudder had been shattered. Roo knew it was possible to control the ship a little by trimming sails, but he had no idea of how one did that and was certain a high rate of speed was now out of the question. The ship began to drift to starboard and the sailors above frantically tried to trim sails. They looked down, awaiting orders, and a few of them could see the Captain lying dead on the deck.

Roo sighed in resignation. He pulled his sword and shouted, "Ready to repel boarders!"

Instantly those in the rigging above began sliding down sheets to reach the deck. Those who had no weapons grabbed belaying pins or large wooden tackles on rope which could be wheeled like a morningstar. The Quegan galley bore down on them and another ballista bolt sped toward the ship's stem. A loud crack was accompanied by the entire ship shuddering with the impact.

From below a voice called out, "We're taking water."

"Wonderful," Roo said.

His ship began to turn sideways to the galley as the wind shifted quarter, and suddenly the huge galley's ram was angled at the starboard stem.

An arrow sped by and Roo realized he was standing exposed to any archers in the rigging of the other ship. He ducked low, behind the slight shelter offered by a hatch cover, knowing his chances for survival were very thin. If they could stay alive until the approaching Kingdom fleet

a Quegan warship's crew. "Stand!" shouted Roo, hoping whatever note of authority he could muster might stiffen the spines of the remaining crew.

Suddenly the ship shuddered and shook like a rat caught by a terrier. The stem lifted as the huge iron-shod ram ripped into the starboard rear

quarter of the ship. Roo held on for his life as more arrows sped past.

He kept as low as possible, waiting for the first boarder.

It seemed as soon as he thought of boarders, they were there. Quegan sailors swung down on ropes overhanging the bow of the galley.

Similarly dressed in white trousers and shirts, with red headcovers, they were each

armed with cutlass and knife. Roo gave a silent prayer that Vasarius wasn't accompanied by a squad of Quegan Legionaries. The men who swarmed his ship were little better than pirates, and might be held at bay.

Roo leaped at the first man near him, running him through before the

boarder had a chance to defend himself. Roo ducked back, using the rear

mast as cover from the archers above. Another pirate managed to step in

the way of an arrow aimed at Roo, and fell to the deck screaming as the

arrow protruded from his thigh.

Roo heard members of his own crew climbing the ladder from the

boarder as he rolled over him and came to his feet. The surprising
boarder was trying to hoist the dead body of a companion to use as a
shield against the arrows, but Roo skewered him before he could get
the
dead man adjusted on his shoulder.

A shaft sped by Roo's face, close enough for him to feel the wind,
and he moved backward, again trying to use the rear mast and the
sails
above as shelter from the bow-fire.

He glanced around and realized that only two of his own men were

standing and there were a half-dozen boarders advancing on him. He
also

knew that if he leaped to the main deck, he'd be exposed to even more
fire from above.

Roo had not gotten to where he was by hesitating. Without looking
back, he shouted, "Abandon ship!" and with a single step he dove over
the side. Roo struck the water as he felt a hot sting in his
shoulder, and

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he gasped involuntarily. Suddenly he had a mouth and nose full of
seawater

and he began choking.

Roo forced himself to the surface, choking and spitting water, and by
sheer force of will he kept himself from panic. He managed a deep
breath

as arrows sped by him, and with a single gulp of air, he dove under
the

water again and started swimming toward the shore. After he had held

the two ships were fast vessels. Neither alone could stand up to a Quegan war galley, but with the galley's ability to maneuver hindered by the sinking freighter, the two cutters were like hounds on a wounded bear with its muzzle stuck in a trap. Men ran around on deck like ants after a stick had been jammed in their hill, The first cutter fired a ballista bolt that sheared rigging and fouled lines. The second fired a bolt that shattered several oars on the port side of the galley, probably killing a dozen slaves as the oars suddenly slammed around inside the hull. Then the Kingdom ship closest to Roo blocked his view of the galley for several minutes. He heard ballistae fire several times before the ship passed and he could again see the galley. The galley was afire. The ship on the far side loosed another flaming bolt and the crew of the galley began to abandon ship. Roo turned and swam toward the shore, memorizing landmarks in the distance. After a few minutes another Kingdom ship appeared bearing down on him, and Roo raised his hand, waving his arm back and forth. The ship lowered sail and armed men on deck stood ready to retrieve ships locked in those in the water. Roo looked again at the two Quegan a death embrace. The sinking treasure ship turned, and Roo could see the stem. There painted in red were the words, Shala Rose. Roo realized he hadn't even known the name of the ship until that moment. Now she was

said,

"And who might you be?"

"Rupert Avery of Krondor," he answered.

The name caused a visible shift in manners. "Mr. Avery," said the officer. "I, m Lieutenant Aker, second officer of the ship."

"Glad to meet you," said Roo. "A few of those swimming around may be my men, but most of them are Quegans."

"Quegans?" said the young officer. "Are they taking a hand?"

"Let's say it's a personal matter. Still, they were not kindly disposed to our cause."

"If you'd like, sir, I'll escort you to our Captain."

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Roo followed the officer to the quarterdeck, where they halted just before the ladder to the sterncastle. Roo knew that Kingdom navy tradition

forbade anyone to climb the stairs to the Captain's domain without invitation.

The Lieutenant called up, "Captain Styles, sir!"

A grey-haired head peered over the railing and called down, "What is it, Mr. Aker?"

"This is ". Rupert Avery of Krondor, sir."

"Heard of you," said the Captain to Roo. "Forgive my lack of hospitality,

but we have to rescue some drowning men."

"Understood, Captain," replied Rupert.

"Perhaps you'll dine with me this evening, after we reach Sarth," suggested the Captain. He turned away before Roo could answer.

Roo looked at the young officer. "Lieutenant, what ship?"

"You're aboard the Royal Bulldog, sir. If you'll come with me, we'll get you into some dry clothing."

...said, "Well, wherever you're from, I'm very glad you got here."
Roo went down belowdecks, to a small cabin he assumed belonged
to the Lieutenant. The officer produced trousers and a white shirt,
dry

stockings, and small clothes. Roo quickly changed, and said, "When we
get situated, I'll make sure these are returned."

"No rush, sir. I've another set."

Roo made his way back up to the main deck to find Quegan) sailors
being, hauled up over the railing, then tied and forced to sit under
the

watchful gaze of armed Kingdom sailors. Sitting at the front of them,
looking as much like a half-drowned rat as anything else, sat a
dejected-looking
figure familiar to Roo.

Roo came and knelt just beyond the guards, so that he was at eyelevel
with the man. "My Lord Vasarius, how pleasant to see you here."

'Avery," the man nearly spat. "Have the Gods selected you to
perSONally

plague me for some affront?'

Roo shrugged. "I wouldn't know. You just happened to be the unlucky
conduit whereby I could achieve some gains for my King. Nothing
personal. "

"It's very personal," said Vasarius.

"Then you better rethink things, for you are in no position to make
threats." Roo looked up to where Lieutenant Akers stood, and said,

"This

is a very important Quegan noble; he's a member of their Imperial
Senate.'~

The Lieutenant motioned to two guards to haul Vasarius up to his
feet. They cut loose his bonds, and Lieutenant Akers said, "I'll show
you
to private quarters, m'lord. You understand there will be a guard
outside

beach, so I guess we're back when close.

Roo walked to the railing and again studied landmarks: the way the road turned, the odd clump of trees near a large boulder overlooking the beach. He glanced over his shoulder, across the deck where the Quegan galley slipped under the water with a burst of bubbles. Yes, he was certain he could find this spot again. Hire a magician from the Wreckers Guild in Krondor to raise the ship and offload the treasure, and he'd be the Western Realm's wealthiest man again. Roo grinned to himself.

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Arutha ducked behind a door. An arrow sped through it, striking the hardwood floor of the main entrance to the abbey. Subai's men had control of the abbey and Nordan's invaders held the outer walls and the cookhouse. Subai had men on the roof of the abbey and they were exchanging bow-shots with those on the wall. So far both sides were being isolated.

Arutha said to Subai, "If we can keep them from getting out the gate, it's as good as a victory."

"If all is going according to plan, we need to hold them until dark." Arutha glanced at the sun in the sky and judged it nearly noon. "Six, seven more hours."

Subai said, "I'm concerned, m'lord. I think I've seen some signals between those on the wall and those in the stable. If they risked lowering a man on the outside of the gate, he may already be down the hill asking

Subai and Brother Dominic until he knew it like his own sons' faces. He knew that from the outside, it was a nearly impregnable fortification.

Only by taking it from within would they gain control. Otherwise a long siege would ensue, requiring that a substantial number of men be diverted from the coming campaign.

"I'm not worried about that," said Arutha. "They'd have to risk getting shot to open the gate and let reinforcements in. Besides, if they can afford to strip men away from the defense of Sarth to rescue the men here, we've lost this battle anyway."

Suddenly a shout heralded a charge from the stable. Arutha stood shocked a moment, as armed men raced toward the main door of the abbey, a flight of arrows over their heads forcing him to retreat from the door. Many of the attackers went down from answering shots from the abbey roof, but most made it to where Arutha, Subai, and a dozen men crowded the entrance. Arutha met the first man at the door and cut him, down before he could step inside. As the man fell, Arutha looked past him to see men risking broken bones by jumping from the parapet, so they could unbar the massive wooden gates.

" 'Ware the gates!" Arutha shouted as he struck out at the next man to face him.

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Without hesitation, Arutha shouted, "Follow me!" and charged out into the open. He knew that if he could keep the riders from fleeing the yard, he could prevent word reaching Nordan that the abbey was under attack. By denying them the gate, it would break the back of the last resistance in the abbey and force a surrender. Half the garrison was under guard in the basements below, and a full hundred lay dead or wounded throughout the compound. The hundred men trapped in the kitchen, the barn, and upon the walls were the only ones left. Arutha felt a surge of energy, something akin to joy, mixed with nothing short of terror, as he dodged through the melee, striking up at a horseman who was attempting to engage another Kingdom soldier. Arutha's blade struck a glancing blow, not injuring the rider, but distracting him enough so the other soldier could unseat him. Riders were milling around and horses were rearing and bucking, panic rising in the herd as the fighting swirled around them. Arutha glanced to his left and saw Subai signaling his men to fan out and, by pointing, to mount an unguarded set of steps leading to the upper wall. Arutha looked toward the gate and saw two men, one wounded, were freeing the bar. He shouted, "The gate!" and charged. Halfway between the main building of the abbey and the gate, an arrow struck Arutha in the neck, between breastplate and helm. For a moment he thought someone had punched him with a fist, for

The two soldiers raced out in the middle of the fight, managed to grab the Duke, and haul him back to Subai's position. Subai knelt beside the Duke, but he had seen enough dead men before that he didn't have to take a second look at Arutha. He considered how ironic it was that this brave man had died in his first conflict, and then put aside all thoughts

of the Duke; Subai had a battle to fight.

Erik signaled to Greylock and the two elements of the Kingdom army charged. Horsemen raced down the main street of Sarth, heading to the

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Trades Masters' Hall, the headquarters and final defense of the invaders.

So far the retaking of Sarth had gone without a hitch. The entire city defense had been ordered south to deal with Greylock's center thrust.

As had been the plan, Greylock stood and engaged, while Erik's right flank element pushed through light resistance on the treacherous hillside east of

the road, and while ships were unloading soldiers at the dock. Owen held a stable front, while Erik feigned a flanking attack from the right. The enemy shifted to face Erik, who withdrew just as soldiers under the command of the Duke of Ran struck them from the rear. Within

then turned to Saga, the mercenary captain who had been among the first to switch sides during the war. "Keep the men back!" he ordered, then he set heels to his horse and rode around to Greylock's position.

"Orders, sir?"

Greylock was sweating furiously under the midday heat, his hair hanging

limply across his brow. "I'm lacking patience, Erik." He rode a little

closer to the building and shouted, "You, in the guild hall!"

An arrow sped from an upper window, missing by a few feet.

"Damn it! I'm talking to you," shouted Greylock.

Erik said, "Let me," and switching to the language of Novindus, he shouted, "Our leader wishes parlay!"

After a moment, a voice from within shouted, "What terms?"

Erik translated.

Owen said, "Tell him, the terms are throw down weapons and walk

Out, or we'll bum the building down with them inside of it. They must decide now!"

Erik translated, and there was the sound of a sudden argument breaking

out inside. Then the sound of fighting erupted, and Erik glanced at

Owen, who nodded.

Erik shouted, "I' Charge!" and from all sides the Kingdom forces rushed

the building.

Erik and Owen were closest, and reached the main door of the building.

Erik turned and shouted, "Bring a ram!"

Kingdom soldiers, they threw the swords to the ground, the Novindus mercenaries' sign of surrender. Duga came to stand beside Erik. "I know these lads. Most of them are pretty decent fellows if you give them a chance." Then he saw a few hanging back at the rear and added,

"Though a few of them should probably be hung just to improve the air around here."

Erik said, "They're all going to be locked up for a while until we can get them sent back home."

Duga said, "Well, even after wintering with you, Captain, I can't say as I understand how you Kingdom folk think, but then nothing that's been happening for the last few years makes any sense to me. When this war is done, maybe you can explain things to me."

Erik said, "As soon as someone explains things to me." Soldiers entered the building and took out the rest of the invaders.

A few were carried out bloodied and unconscious. One of the first to surrender

said to Erik and Duga, "That lot didn't see any point to surrender. The rest of us didn't see any point in being roasted for Fadawah."

Duga grinned. "Nordan will fart flames when he hears this."

The soldier said, "He already did." He pointed to a man being carried out. "That's General Nordan."

Erik motioned for the two soldiers to take the unconscious general to one side. Owen nodded, a smile of satisfaction on his face. Reports started

coming in that the town of Sarth was secure. Owen said, Erik, take a company up the road and see if the abbey is secured. If you encounter any of the enemy, get back down that road as fast as you can." He turned

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

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Jadow, who looked as if he had just finished a relaxing morning ride, nodded and signaled. "Second squad, follow me. The rest of you, help secure the area!"

Erik led his small company through the town of Sarth. There was occasional fighting in scattered locations, as a few hardcore members of

Nordan's army refused to surrender, but mostly bands of disarmed prisoners

being taken to the rear where a compound was being erected to confine them. A few townspeople, who had fled during the fighting, could

be seen up in the hills surrounding the city, a few of the more courageous among them coming down into the town.

Erik and his men rode eastward, and rather than veering back along the King's Highway where it turned south, they moved along a smaller road heading upward, into the mountains. Atop the first of these, overlooking

the coast, was the Abbey of Sarth, once home to the largest library on the world of Midkemia.

The horses were tired from the charge through the town, but Erik pushed them, anxious to find out if Arutha and Subai had been successful,

or if a force of armed men was poised to strike down at Sarth. They had

been so successful in retaking the southern end of Fadawah's holdings,

Kingdom forces within, his own men would have died, never reaching the walls. A warning shout alerted Erik, and he formed up his men to charge. He gave the signal as soon as the gates began to open. Erik and his men rode into the midst of a furious, surging battle, with horsemen and men on foot locked in a death struggle. Erik struck at the first horseman he faced, knocking him completely out of his saddle. The abrupt appearance of Kingdom soldiers riding in through the now open gate demoralized the remaining invaders. Quickly they started to back away and throw down weapons in surrender. Erik caught his breath and took in the scene around him. Men lay all across the courtyard, as well as a few wounded or dead horses. Erik motioned for Jadow Shati to move the prisoners over to the stable. Erik dismounted and led his horse to the entrance of the abbey building. He glanced up at the old keep tower and realized that with proper supplies, this fortress could withstand a year of siege. He counted himself lucky the Prince had agreed to launch the attack as soon as possible, rather than led Nordan get entrenched. "Erik!" called a voice. Erik turned to see Captain Subai motioning for him to come over. Erik hurried to the abbey's main entrance. Just inside the door lay Duke Arutha. Erik glanced at Subai, who shook his head slightly. Softly the Captain of the Pathfinders said, "He tried to keep the raiders from opening the gates. If you had arrived a half hour earlier . . . "

Erik looked at the fallen Duke. He appeared to be asleep. "He fought well?" Erik asked.

Kesh learns we are committing all our soldiers to retake Ylith, and have only Duko's mercenaries along the border, without support troops within the city, they can wreak havoc." Erik said, "Let us hope we can keep Kesh from discovering this before the war in the North is over." Subai looked down at Arutha. "It was his task to see that they didn't." Looking at Erik, he added, "Now it is someone else's task. But it is the Prince's responsibility." With a gesture, he indicated the Duke's body was to be carried inside. To Erik he said, "As soon as Greylock has soldiers sent up here to secure this location, my Pathfinders will return to Krondor. We will return the Duke home." Erik nodded. "And I will go north with Greylock." Erik turned and walked out into the courtyard, to bring order out of chaos and get the situation under control as quickly as possible. They had won a stunning victory, at far less cost than anticipated, and far quicker than they had imagined. Yet there was so very much to do still before them.

Fourteen

JIMMY V~TEPT.

Standing at attention on the steps of the palace in Krondor, next to his brother, a step behind the Prince, his tears ran freely down his face.

as he watched the wagon carrying his father's body pass by. A day of mourning had been announced for Duke Arutha and the others who had fallen in retaking Sarth.

Dash wondered if it was worth it. He didn't feel anything, save a numb empty place within. Jimmy was expressing his anger and pain, yet within Dash something lay buried. Looking at the the assembled nobles and military captains of the Kingdom, all bowing their heads in respect

as his father's body was returned to Krondor, Dash just couldn't make any sense of it.

His father had always been such a sensible man. He was a decent enough swordsman, at least for practice duels, and he kept himself fit,

riding and swimming when the opportunity presented itself, but he had never fought in a military action. Then Dash realized he was thinking in

present tense. He had been, from what Captain Subai said, a brave soldier

at the last, but he should never have been allowed to go on that mission.

Dash discovered tears forming in his eyes and he blinked them back.

Duke Arutha had been the practical member of the family. Their mother was always obsessed with the gossip of the royal court in Rillanon,

and with long visits back to her own family in Roldem. The boys' childhood

had been dominated by nannies, tutors, and their grandfather, who would teach them how to climb walls, pick locks, and all manner of outrageous

behavior. Their grandmother had been a soothing presence and their father had been a rock, a calm, quiet man who had been affectionate

family. His grandparents in Roldem were strangers, for the most part. He had a half-dozen visits to that island kingdom in his childhood-his maternal grandparents only came to Rillanon once, for his parents' wedding. His sister was married to the Duke of Faranzia in Roldem and had never returned to the Kingdom for a visit since her wedding. All that remained was his brother Jimmy.

As the wagon vanished into the stable area, Prince Patrick said, "Gentlemen, the entire nation mourns the loss of your father. Now, if you would join me in council in an hour, please." He nodded across the courtyard to where Francie stood with her father, and turned and mounted the broad palace steps. As soon as the Prince was out of sight, the rest of the assembled nobles in Krondor dispersed.

Jimmy took a deep breath, getting his emotions under control, and motioned for Dash to accompany him. They followed the wagon around the central palace to where an undertaker was overseeing the removal of their father's body from the wagon. Two soldiers gently removed the body of Duke Arutha, wrapped from head to foot in faded linen someone had found in Sarth. The undertaker turned to Jimmy and said, "You are Lord

Arutha's son?"

Jimmy nodded, indicating with a gesture that he and Dash were the Duke's sons.

The undertaker attempted a compassionate pose. "The nation mourns with you, young lords. How will you wish to dispose of your father's remains."

Dash put his hand on Jimmy's shoulder and said, "Let's get a drink."

"Only one. We need to see the Prince in an hour. We can get drunk in Father's memory after."

Dash nodded as they walked back toward the main entrance to the palace.

Malar Enares was standing before the entrance when they reached it.

"Sirs," he said. "Most regrettable. You have my sympathies."

The servant from the Vale of Dreams had found a hundred ways to make himself useful around the palace. When Jimmy had returned, expecting

to find the servant still under guard, he had been both amused and surprised to discover him working frantically around Duke's headquarters.

He seemed a wonder when it came to organizing, cleaning, and keeping things orderly. He had attached himself to Jimmy again when Duke rode south to take command of the Southern Marches and oversee the sentry forts along the Keshian border.

Malar followed the brothers inside. "May I do something for you, young lords?"

Jimmy said, "If you would bring a bottle of very good&brandy to my quarters, I would appreciate it."

"I'll see what I can do," said Malar, rushing off.

Dash and Jimmy walked the long corridors of the palace, now restored to nearly the state they had enjoyed before the destruction of Krondor.

Workers still scurried throughout the palace, repainting trim around windows

and doors, laying tiles, and hanging tapestries. The rearmost stairs to the upper floors were still in need of repair, but the last of the cracked

stones had been removed and replaced by masons, and the soot and fire damage erased.

"Do you remember how this place looked before?" asked Dash.

Jimmy's eyes watered as well, as he said, "I know. How bloody stupid was that?"

"You've written to Mother and the aunts?"

"Not yet. I'll do so this night. I'm still not sure what I'll say.)~

Dash let his tears flow. "Tell them he died bravely. For King and Country.

"Cold comfort," said Jimmy.

Dash wiped at his eyes. "He had to go."

Jimmy said, "No, he didn't."

"Yes, he did," said Dash. "All his life he has been in the shadow of Grandfather, and of the man for whom he was named."

Jimmy wiped his own eyes and said, "History will only acknowledge one Arutha of Krondor." He sighed. "Father will possibly be a small notation somewhere. The man named for a great prince who served admirably

as administrator in Rillanon and Krondor. Isn't there more for him than just that?"

Dash said, "Only to those of us who knew him and loved him."

Jimmy stood as a knock came at the door. He opened it and found Malar Enares standing there, holding a tray upon which rested a bottle of

brandy and two crystal goblets.

Jimmy stepped aside and allowed the servant to enter. Malar put the tray down on the table and said, "I wish to express my deepest regrets,

young sirs. While having not the pleasure of meeting your distinguished

father, I have heard nothing of the man that was not salutary."

"Thank you," said Jimmy.

Dash took the decanter and poured drinks as Malar left and closed the door behind him. Offering a goblet to his brother, Dash lifted his and

said, "To Father."

noble in history."

"Maybe that's what Father knew from the start; it's just getting the job done and let history decide what history will decide," observed Dash.

SHAP,DS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Jimmy said, "No doubt you're right. Well, we'd better get to Patrick's

office and see what the Prince will decide."

Dash stood up, adjusted his tunic, and said, "Do you think he'll make you Duke of Krondor? Eldest son and all that."

Jimmy laughed. "Hardly. He'll want someone with more experience in the office, as will the King."

Dash opened the door. "You're only two years younger than Patrick, jimmy."

"Which is exactly why Borric will want someone older and wiser in Krondor, ' ' said Jimmy as he moved through the door. "Had Father been

the Duke of Crydee or Yabon, I most certainly would have gotten the title, with a strong Kingdom advisor on the first ship west, but Krondor?

No, there's too much to be done and too many potential mistakes." As he moved down the hall, he added, "Besides, there are too many headaches.

Whatever Patrick offers me will be better than the office of Duke."

They hurried along until they reached the side entrance to the Prince's

quarters. Jimmy knocked and the door opened. A page stepped aside and allowed them to enter. Compared to the cramped offices endured in

Darkmoor, these offices were spacious. The books and scrolls that their father had ordered hauled to safety were being returned to their appropriate

again
express my sorrow at your father's death. His loss is not only to his
family
and friends, but to the Kingdom as a whole." Patrick looked around
the
room as if seeking something. "It's as if I expect to see him at
every hand.

I know now just how much I've come to rely upon his counsel."
Patrick let out a slow breath close to a sigh and continued, "But we
must, as ever, press on. Lord Silden will act as my counselor until
the
I(ing sees fit to name a new duke in Krondor." Patrick looked at
Jimmy
and said, "I know you well enough to know you didn't expect the
office."
Jimmy shook his head. "Ten years from now, perhaps, but not now."
Patrick nodded. "Good, because we need you somewhere outside of
I(rondor. ~ ~

"Where, Highness?"

Raymond E. Feist

I'll need someone dependable to keep an eye on Duko. You seem to
get along well enough with him, and I need someone down there who

will keep him in line."

Jimmy bowed his head. "Highness.')

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tenant
farmers had ceased to work the land centuries before as Rillanon had expanded its reach onto the mainland. But for its modest size, it was among the most beautiful estates in the Kingdom. Their grandfather had arranged for it to go to Arutha when the old Earl of Vencar had died without heirs. Jimmy had been born in the palace, as had his sister, but they had moved there when he was a baby. Dash had been born there. It was home.

'So unless my father writes back telling me I'm an idiot, from now forward, you are Earl James.'

Jimmy said, "I thank His Highness."

Patrick said, "I have a special job for you, Dash."

"Highness."

"We have a problem here in Krondor. The army is in the North, and Duko's swords are down South. I've got the palace guard, and that's all.

The city is returning to life and it's being overrun by thugs and ruffians, cutthroats and thieves. I need someone to bring, order. I think of all those I have around here, you have the most affinity for the city streets. I am appointing you Sheriff of Krondor. Until we can create a true City Watch

and Office of Constables, you are the law in the city. Recruit who you

can, but keep this city under control until the wars are over.

Dash said, "Sheriff?"

Patrick said, "You object?"

"Ah ... no, Highness. I'm just a little surprised."

patrick
got a concerned look on his face. "Something is not right. The
defense

along the coast is weak. We know that Fadawah offered up Duko because
he was fearful of Duko's loyalty.

"Now it appears he gave up Nordan in the same way, but by all
reports Nordan was his oldest and most trusted ally."

"Perhaps his hold over his men is less secure than we thought,"
observed

Jimmy.
Brian of Silden said, "All the reports indicate a difficult winter
for the
invaders, with many dying of injuries and starvation. But we also
have
word from our agents that they're trading with Queg and the Free
Cities,

food is plentiful, and they're established in Ylith."

Patrick ran his hand over his face. "Any word from Yabon?"

"None," said Duke Brian. "We've had nothing since the battle of
Sarh. No ships can get past Queg's pirates to reach the Free Cities.
All

our ships from the Far Coast were used to support the raid. If word
is
coming, it is coming by runner, and the chances of a courier getting
through the enemy to reach us is thin. Perhaps when we get closer to
Ylith, we may hear of Yabon, but for now we must pray the young Duke
is able to keep LaMut and Yabon intact."

Looking at Jimmy and Dash, Patrick said, "Dine with me tonight,
both of you, and we'll discuss your duties. In your case, Jimmy,
before
you leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" said Dash. "Patrick ... Highness, I thought we would

"At supper, then," said Dash.

"You are dismissed," said the Prince.

The brothers bowed and left the Prince's office.

"Do you believe that?" said Jimmy.

"What?" said Dash.

"That business about 'we all make sacrifices.'"

Dash shrugged. "It's just Patrick. He never knows when he's ahead, and when he should just shut up."

Jimmy laughed as they turned the corner toward their rooms. "You've got that right. Probably why he was always such a bad card player."

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I ~ R æKVmnnd Fq Feist

"Perfect," said Nakor.

Aleta stood still, but she said, "I feel silly."

"You look wonderful," said Nakor.

The young woman stood on a box, a linen sheet around her frad and ~l!shoulders, otherwise garbed in her normal dress. A sculptor worked furi,,~,

I,ously in clay, trying to capture her likeness. He had been at it for three

,~da s, and stepped back and said, "It's finished."

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Nakor walked around it while Aleta got off the box and came to look at it. "Do I look like that?" she asked.

"Yes," said Nakor. He continued to walk around it, and finally said,

"Yes, that will do." Looking at the sculptor he asked, "How long will this take?"

"How big do you want it?"

&\$I want it life-sized." Pointing at Aleta, he said, "The same size as

...you want me to bring them here?

"I want one delivered here, to be put up in the wagon yard. The other one bring), to Krondor."

"Krondor? Mr. Avery didn't say anything about trucking a statue all the way to Krondor."

"Do you want to let wagoners put up your statue?"

The sculptor shrugged. "Makes no difference to me, but it will cost extra.) ~

Nakor frowned. "That's between you and Roo."

The sculptor nodded and carefully wrapped up the clay reference piece in oilcloth and moved it to his wagon, outside.

Aleta said, "Am I done now?"

Nakor said, "Probably not, but you don't need to pose anymore."

'What is this all about?" she asked, folding up the sheet she had worn.

"I've felt very silly posing for that thing."

"It's a statue of the Goddess."

"You used me for a statue of the Goddess!" She seemed appalled.

t~llat)s. . .I~

Nakor looked puzzled. "Something I don't understand. But it was the right choice."

Brother Dominic had been in the corner, observing the entire interaction,

and he said, "Child, trust me, this strange man knows things,

things he doesn't understand. But if he knows them, they are true.ly

The young woman looked as if that explanation caused her even more

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confusion. Dominic said, "If Nakor said it's proper for you to pose for

accommodate
your plans to the best of my ability. If that means accompanying
you to Krondor, then I will go."
Nakor said, "That's good. Things here will continue to operate
without
me. Sho Pi can oversee the feeding of the hungry and teaching the
children. He's already begun training disciples in the basics of
being a
monk; the order of Dala is a good place to start, and that will weed
out
those looking for a free meal and warm bed from those who really want
to contribute."

"When do we leave?" asked Dominic.
Nakor shrugged. "In a day or two. The last detachments of the army
will be leaving to journey to Krondor, to join the Prince, and we can
tag
along as escort."

Dominic said, "Very well. I will be ready."
As Dominic left, Nakor turned and regarded Aleta, who was hanging
washing on a line across the courtyard. The sunlight struck her from
behind,
putting a golden nimbus of light around her head for a moment as
she stood on her tiptoes to clip the clothing to the line. Nakor
grinned.
"Something very wonderful," he said to himself.

Dinner was quiet. Conversation had been subdued throughout
evening. Mostly it had been sporadic, on this or that issue before
throne, or a small remembrance of Lord Arutha, but long periods pas
in silence.

As the last course was removed, waiters appeared with trays on

The Duke of Silden said, "Since boyhood, Arutha and I were friends.

If I was to name the one quality of his many that I found most remarkable,

it was his unrivaled clarity of thought. Whatever opinion he gave, on whatever subject, it was the distillation of a remarkable mind.'~he may

have been the most gifted man I have known."

Jimmy and Dash exchanged glances, for they had never considered what his peers might have thought of their father.

The other nobles made their remarks, and last before the boys was Captain Subai. Not given to long speeches, he seemed uncomfortable, but

nevertheless said, "I think of the Duke as perhaps the wisest man I've

known. He knew his limits and yet was not afraid to challenge them. He

put the welfare of others above his own. He loved his family. He will be missed."

Subai looked at Jimmy, who said, "He was named for a great man."

Jimmy nodded toward Patrick, who acknowledged the reference to his grandfather. "He was raised by a man who may be unique in our history.

Yet he knew how to be himself." Looking at Patrick, he said, "I think about being the grandson of Lord James of Krondor, perhaps because I was named for him. I rarely thought what it must have been like to be his son." Tears gathered in James's eyes as he said, "I just wish I could

have told him how much he meant to me."

Dash said, "I too. I think I may have taken him for granted. I hope I never make that mistake with anyone else who is dear to me."

The Prince stood, taking a glass from the servant. Others did as well.

...my was about to bid Bush good night when a page came running.

"Gentlemen, please! Attend the Prince at once!"
They hurried after the page, who led them back to the Prince's office.

Inside they found Patrick standing before his desk. His face was a red mask of rage and in his fist he held a message that he had crushed. He

held it out to Lord Silden, who unfolded and read it. His eyes widened.

"Gods!" he said. Looking stricken, he said quietly, "LaMut has fallen."

Patrick said, "A soldier escaped and made his way to Lorie, with half of Fadawah's army behind him. He died after delivering the message.

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

it came south by fast courier from there to Darkmoor, then to here.

LaMut has been in enemy hands for three weeks now." Patrick spoke bitterly.

"We congratulated ourselves on the ease with which we took Sarth, and it was all a trade. He gave us back a fishing town, a port of no importance,

and in exchange he took the heart of Yabon! Yabon City is now at grave

peril and we are no closer to retaking Ylith than we were at first thaw!"

the fighting is fierce. It may have fallen already. And the report says some sort of black magic is being directed at the defenders." Jimmy and Dash exchanged glances..All reports from the previous

year's campaigns said the Pantathian Serpent Priests were gone, but they may have been premature in their assessment. And there was nothing to prevent the magic being the product of human mages.

"We must get word to my great-grandfather," said Jimmy.

"The magician?" said Patrick. "where is he?"

"He should still be in Elvandar, if things are as he planned them. He will return to Stardock in another month's time."

"Captain Subai," said Patrick. "Can you get messengers to Yabon?"

"It's difficult, Highness. We may be able to get one through the mountains

to the north of Lorie. Perhaps reach some of the hillmen from Yabon. One of them could continue on to Elvandar. "

Patrick said, "Subai, leave at first light for Darkmoor. Get whatever help you need and go north. I have no one else to spare for the task. Greylock and von Darkmoor will press on until they reach the invaders'

Positions south of Ylith. Jimmy, you will go south to Duko and apprise

him Of what we face. Kronador is now an empty shell and vulnerable. We r,must show a strong face to everyone. Dash, you must keep this city under

control, by whatever means. Now, Lord Silden, please stay and help me compose the orders. Gentlemen, the rest of you are dismissed."

Dash said, "Sheriff?" With a sigh he followed his brother.

The dawn was still hours away) but the sky was lightening in the east as Dash stood next to his brother. Upon another horse sat Malar

Enares, the servant from the Vale of Dreams, who had somehow learned of Jimmy's journey. He had prevailed upon Jimmy to allow him to ride south with him, claiming that while work was plentiful in Krondor, payment

wasn't, and that his former master's business holdings along the Keshian border might still be operating. As the man was harmless company in the main, and often useful, Jimmy agreed.

Captain Subai rode up with a company of his Pathfinders and handed a canvas-wrapped bundle to Jimmy. "This was your father's sword, Jimmy. I took it from him before they prepared his body to return it to

Krondor. I knew as elder son it was to be yours." Jimmy took the bundle and unwrapped it. The hilt was worn, and the scabbard nicked and scratched. But the blade was immaculate. Jimmy drew the blade and saw the faint outlines of a miniature warhammer seemingly etched into the forte of the blade. He knew that this was where

Macros the Black had empowered the blade with a talisman from the Abbot of Sarth Abbey when Prince Arutha had to face the moredhel leader

Murmandamus. The sword had hung in the study in Krondor since the old Prince's death, and had been sent by Duke James to his son. Now Jimmy held it. "I don't know," said Jimmy. "This should go to Patrick or the King, I think."

Subai shook his head. "No, had the Prince of Krondor wished the sword to go to the King, it would have. He left it in Krondor for a reason."

"Thank you," said Dash.

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Subai said, "If we don't chance to meet again, young Jimmy, it has

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lead the Pathfinders who travel to Yabon and on to

been an honor."

Jimmy said, "Safe travel, Captain."

The Pathfinders rode out the gate, heading east at a relaxed trot.

Jimmy looked at his brother. "Stay safe, little brother."

Dash reached up to shake Jimmy's hand. "You travel safely, too, big brother. I don't know how long it will be before we see one another, but

you will be missed."

Jimmy nodded. "Letters to Mother and the rest of the family are in the pouch bound for Rillanon. When I know where I'm likely to be,

I'll

send word." .

Dash waved as Jimmy and his company rode out the gate, then turned around to head back into the castle. He had a meeting in an hour with the Prince, Lord Brian, and others in the castle. After that he had to begin

The escort stopped behind him. The Captain of the company of Patrick's Royal Household Guards said, "This is as far as we're supposed to go, m'lord." He glanced around. "Leave it to those--"

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"Captain?"

"I mean no disrespect to Lord Duko, M'lord, but after all, we were s just last year.

fighting him and those miserable bastards he calls soldier

he noted Jimmy's disapproving expression

and said, "AnywaY, they

should be here, making a camp, before they start back to their patrol."

"Maybe they ran into some trouble."

"Possible, my lord."

They were at a fork in the road, the agreed-upon southern limit of Krondorian patrols--everything to the south was Duko's responsibility.

The southwest fork in the road led to Port Vykor, while the southeast fork

would start around the edge of Shandon Bay, eventually leading toward Land's End.

Jimmy said, "We'll be fine, Captain. We're halfway to Port Vykor

and should be running into Lord Duko's patrols any time now. if

they're

not here today, they'll be here tomorrow, I'm sure."

ward, while Jimmy and Malar continued southwest. They rode through quiet countryside, scrub grass, and what once might have been farmland, but which had known the tread of the conqueror's boot too often. Keshians on their way to the Kingdom, and Kingdom soldiers on their way to Kesh, had turned these rolling hills and sparse woodlands into a no-man's

land in the last hundred years. The rich lands of the Vale of Dreams to the east kept farmers and their families struggling despite the constant threat of war between two nations rolling over them. The lands through which Jimmy and Malar rode offered no such bounty. They might be the only two men for fifty miles in any direction.

As the sun sank low in the western sky, Malar asked, "What shall we do now, my lord?"

Jimmy looked around and pointed to a small dell near a clear-running stream. "Make camp for the night. Tomorrow we'll continue toward Port Vykor."

Malar had unsaddled the horses and brushed them down. Jimmy had discovered he was a competent enough groom along with his other talents.

Jimmy said, "You feed the horses and I'll gather some firewood."

Malar said, "Yes, m'lord."

Jimmy moved around the campsite, finding enough small branches and sticks to make a reasonable fire.

After the fire was ready, Malar set about making an acceptable meal: hot trail biscuits, a mix of dried beef and vegetables chopped and mixed

is almost certainly dead, but perhaps his family has conspired to keep his business afloat and I can be of use to them. But I would rather spend a little more time in your company--the fierceness of your blade makes me more comfortable on the road than I would be alone."

"You managed well enough for those winter months you wandered 'n the wilderness."

"Of necessity, but not by choice. And most of that time was spent starving and hiding."

Jimmy nodded. He ate his meal and sipped his wine. "Is this of?" he asked.

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Malar sipped his wine. "Not that I can tell, young lord."

Jimmy shrugged. "It's odd for this type of wine. Something metallic."

Malar took another sip. "Not that I can notice, sir. Perhaps you are just getting an odd aftertaste from the food. Maybe with the next drink it will taste differently."

Jimmy sipped again and swallowed. "No, it's definitely off." He set the cup aside. "I think some water would be better." Malar started to stand, and Jimmy said, "I'll get it." He started walking toward the creek and suddenly felt a wave of dizziness. He turned and looked to where the horses were tied. The horse seemed to be moving away from him, and then he felt as if he stepped into a hole, for he was now a great deal closer to the ground than before. He looked down and saw that he was on his

back into the pouch. Jimmy felt his legs getting cold and felt a distant stab of panic. His thinking was growing foggy and he couldn't remember what it was he was supposed to do. His throat was tightening and his breathing was growing labored. Jimmy tried to force open his mouth with his left hand, which now felt as if he were wearing huge gloves. Dull sensations reached his brain, and suddenly he gagged on his own fingers, vomit rushing up through his mouth and nose. He gasped and choked, spat, and groaned aloud. His body wracked with pain as he felt his stomach heave again. Malar's voice came from a great distance away. "It's a pity such a fair young lord has to come to such a messy and undignified end, but such are the necessities of war." Somewhere in a dim evening, Jimmy heard a horse riding away, and then he was hit by another agonizing cramp and everything faded from view.

Dash looked across the faces of the men who had been recruited. Some were ex-soldiers, grey-haired men who remembered how to handle a sword. Others were street toughs, men who were just as likely to be brawling in a tavern as trying to keep the peace in the city. A few were mercenaries, looking for steady work, men who were clearly Kingdom citizens and who were not known criminals.

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"We're presently under martial law in Krondor, which means just about any violation of the law is a hanging offense."

when on duty. It's what marks you as the Prince's men. You break a head while wearing this, you're restoring order; you break a head without it, and you're another thug I'll see behind bars. Is that clear?"

The men nodded and grunted agreement.

"I'll make this simple. This armband doesn't give you the right to bully, to settle old grudges, or to annoy the women in the town. Any man

here who is convicted of assault, rape, or theft while wearing this will be changed. Is that clear?"

The men were silent a moment, and a few nodded they understood.

"Is that clear?" Dash repeated, and the men were more vocal in acknowledging the question.

"Now, until we can recruit a W-blown City Watch,-the routine will be a half-day on, then a half-day off. One day in five, you'll work round the clock while the other half will get the day to themselves. If you know any men of arms-bearing age who can be recruited and can be trusted, send them to see me."

Using a chopping motion, he split die forty men in the room in half.

"You," he said to the men on his right, "are the day watch. You," he said to the men on his left, "are the night watch. Get me another twenty

good men and we'll go to three watches."

The men nodded.

.Dash said, "Now, headquarters will be here in the palace until we can get the city courts and jail rebuilt. The prison here is the only one we

place, not
all Over the city. So, pass the word, the market is open from sunset
to

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,~,Midnight now. The rest of the city is still under curfew unless
the person

~is on their way home from the market. And they better have the goods
Or gold to show they've been trading.

"Anyone causes you trouble, deal with it. We don't have) enough
swords to get you out of trouble if you get in over your head. " He
looked

around the room at the faces of the men he now commanded and said,
,,"If you're killed, I promise we'll avenge you."

One of the men said, "That's comforting," and the others laughed.

"I'll lead the first of you down to the market. You lot on the night
shift, turn in. You're going to patrol the entire city, and if you
see anyone

outside the market after dark, bring them in for questioning.

"For today, anyone asks, you tell them you're the Prince's Law. Let's
ge

t the word out that order is returning to Krondor. Now, let's go."

The twenty men on the day shift rose and followed Dash outside the
room. He moved through the large courtyard of the palace to the newly
restored drawbridge over the still-dry moat. Some of the water system
was

e

under repair and the palace wouldn't be isolated from the city by the
moat again for a few more weeks. As they crossed the drawbridge, Dash

responsibility.

More than once he silently cursed Patrick for his choice.

Dash was down to four men when he reached the market square of Krondor. Shortly after the original keep of the castle had been built, when

the first Prince of Krondor had declared this city the capital of the Western

Realm of the Kingdom of the Isles, the traders and local fishermen and

farmers who lived in the region began regularly gathering in this market

to trade, barter, and sell their wares. Over the years the city had grown,

developed, and evolved to the point where the vast majority of trade was

conducted by businessmen in all quarters of the city, but the ancient market

square endured, and it was the first place for the reviving city to find

its financial soul. It was thronging with men and women of all stations:

merchants, nobles, fishermen, farmers, traders, peddlers, whores, beggars,

thieves, and vagabonds.

Several people cast a wary eye at the five men, for while there were swordsmen here or there, the majority of soldiers had departed the

city

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with Duko heading south, or with the Armies of the West, heading north.

only the Prince's Royal Household Guard remained, and they remained in the palace.

Luis looked over and smiled. "Dash! It's good to see you."

"When did you arrive in Krondor?"

"Very early this morning," replied Luis.

They shook hands, and Karli said, "I was very sorry to hear about your father. I still remember the day I first met him, at our house." She

glanced over in the general direction of where their townhouse had once

stood, across the street from Barret's Coffee House, now a burned-out husk of a building. "He was very kind to Roo and me."

Dash said, "Thank you. It's very difficult, but ... well, you've lost your father, so you know."

She nodded.

Luis fingered the armband and said, "What is this?"

"I'm the new Sheriff of Krondor, and it falls to me to uphold the Prince's peace in the city."

Luis smiled. "You'd be better off coming back to work for Roo. You'd lose your noble office, but you'd make a great deal more money with far

less work.,,

Dash laughed. "Probably you're right, but as it is, we're very shorthanded

and Prince Patrick needs all of us pulling our weight." He glanced at the freight. "Goods from Darkmoor?"

"No," said Luis. "We unloaded our cargo from Darkmoor when we got in early this morning. These are from the Far Coast, actually.

The

ships still can't get into the harbor, but they're anchoring off of Fishtown

and we're ferrying the goods ashore with fishing boats."

Karli asked, "How is your brother?"

"He's fine; he's running an errand for Patrick. He should be halfway t' Port Vykor about now."

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'That would be welcome, Luis."

Karli counted out the gold the merchant gave him, under the watchful eye of the merchant's bodyguard, and then said, "Luis, we can't get young

Dash drunk, so maybe we should get him to s

hare a bite." She looked at

Dash. "Hungry?"

Dash said, "Actually, I am."

They walked across the market to an open-air kitchen, where hot meat . . . , "Pies were being sold. Karli purchased three, then they moved to an ale

~, wagon, where Luis got three jacks of cold brew for them. Like most of

those eating in the market, they stood and made do with keeping out of

the way of those walking through the aisle.

Luis said, "I was only partly joking; I could use someone of your talents. Things are beginning to turn around and men of talent are going

to get rich." He motioned with his bad hand while juggling the hot pie

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ager of all Avery and Jacoby business while he's gone."

now. Helen insisted."

Karli said, It's Avery and de Savon,

the feeling most of that is gone with the destruction of the city. I know he had some holdings in the East, but I think he's borrowed a great deal to get this enterprise underway. I know much about his business, but there is more that I don't know." He looked at Karli.

"Roo has told me most everything about his business interests," said Karli. "Except some things to do with the crown. I think the Kingdom owes Roo a large debt."

"No doubt," said Dash. "My grandfather got several very sizable loans from the Bitter Sea Company." Dash looked around. "While I suspect they will eventually be paid, as you can see, the Kingdom has a great deal to repair here before debts are settled." He finished his pie.

With a long pull he drained the jack of ale, and said, "I thank you for the meal-

Before he could say more, a shout from the next aisle caused him to turn. "Thief."

Dash was off, hurrying toward the source of the disturbance. I-he rounded a corner and saw a man running), right at him, looking over his

shoulder to see who was behind. Dash braced himself, and as the man turned to look ahead, Dash struck him hard across the chest with an extended arm. As Dash expected, the man's feet went right out from under

him and he fell hard upon the ground. Dash knelt, his sword across the man's throat before he could regain his wits, and said, "In a hurry?"

The man started to move, but at the gentle pressure of the blade against his neck he relaxed. "Not anymore," he said with a grimace.

gathered
in the quarter seemed indifferent or openly contemptuous. Dash
returned
to where Karli and Luis stood. "Well, I think that went rather
well, don't you?"
Karli laughed, and Luis said, "There are many here in the square who
would just as soon not see any return of law to the city."
Dash said, "And I think I just spotted another of them. Excuse me,"
he said, darting into the crowd after a youngster he saw stealing a
trinket
from a distracted merchant.
Karli and Luis watched him until after he vanished into the press,
and
Karli said, "I always liked that young man."
Luis said, "There's a great deal of his grandfather in him. He's a
charming rogue."
Karli said, "Don't call him that. He has far too deep a sense of duty
to be a rogue. ~ p
Luis said, "I stand corrected. You are, of course, right."

Karli laughed. "Helen has you trained well, doesn't she?"
Luis laughed in return. "It was easy. I would never wish to make her
unhappy.Pg
"Scant chance of that," said Karli. "Well, we have another load
waiting
at the docks. Let's go get it."
As Luis mounted the wagon, Karli put her hand on her lower back
and stretched. "I won't be doing this much longer. I hope Roo
finished
UP his business to the north and gets back soon."

air, as did you."

The defeated Quegan noble looked at his former business associate and current enemy. "Your Captain has been almost gracious in allowing me some liberty from that cabin."

"As is befitting your rank. Had our positions been reversed, I suspect

I would be belowdecks on a Quegan ship, pulling against an oar."

"As is befitting your rank," replied Vasarius.

Roo laughed. "You haven't entirely lost your sense of humor, I see."

"I wasn't joking," Vasarius answered flatly.

Roo's smile faded. "Well, as fate would have it, you will enjoy a far less dire fate than I would have, it seems."

"I would have had you killed," said Vasarius.

"No doubt." Roo was silent a moment, then said, "My Prince is almost certain to return you to Queg by the first Free Cities ship heading

there, as he has no desire to further antagonize your Emperor. It seems

to me we have this opportunity to reach an accommodation."

Vasarius turned to face Roo. "Accommodation? To what purpose?

You've won. I am close to ruin. My last copper piece was tied up in those

ships and the cargo we sold to Fadawah. It's now at the bottom of the sea, and I can't see how you can be of any help to me, considering you

were the one who sank my treasure!"

Roo shrugged. "Strictly speaking, you sank the treasure. I was merely trying to steal it.

"In any event, that wealth was stripped from the citizens of the Kingdom,

and perhaps some from those living across the sea. I can't feel much sympathy for you losing that fortune, if you can see my point."

"Barely. But it's entirely academic, now, isn't it?"

,, Your Lord James was far too clever, by half. I'm sure, had I checked, I would have found more rumors to support the story of a vast treasure fleet coming from across the Endless Sea."

Roo said, "There is that. James had the most facile mind I've ever encountered. But that's not the point. The point is you have something to gain as do I, and we need to agree to that before we reach Krondor."

"What is that?"

"The price of my life."

Vasarius studied Roo for a long moment, then said, "Say on.)t

"I was taking that treasure ship of yours to Krondor. I would have sent the ship back to you, for I would not be counted a pirate, but the

gold was taken from the Kingdom and was to be returned to the Kingdom. "

He smiled. "As it happens, the crown is in debt to me, considerable debt, and I suspect I would have accounted much of that treasure to that

debt, so in a sense, it was more my treasure than yours."

Vasarius said, "Avery, your logic astonishes me."

g & lm,, IA you. II

"It wasn't a compliment. Besides, the treasure resides below a great deal of ocean at the moment."

"Ah, but I know how to get it," said Roo.

Vasarius's eyes narrowed. He said, "And you need me to get it?"

"No, actually, I don't need you at all. In fact, unless you have access

to certain magicians, you're of no use to me. I can locate members of the

Wreckers Guild of Krondor. They're actively clearing the harbor right

"In exchange for what?"

"For you not engaging the services of a highly trained assassin as soon

as you return to Queg."

"That is all?"

"More, a vow that you will never attempt to harm me or my family, nor will you idly allow anyone over whom you have influence in Queg to trouble us."

Vasarius was silent for a very long time, and Roo resisted the impulse to speak.

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Finally the Quegan noble said, "If you can do this and account to me half the money you raise less the Prince's cut and the guild's fee, then I

will agree to seek no further reprisals against you or your family. The night air was cooling, and Roo hugged himself. at takes a great load off my mind."

"Is there anything else?" asked Vasarius.

"One suggestion," said Roo.

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going
to be a great deal of profit in rebuilding the entire Bitter Sea
after the war
with Fadawah is finished, and those who aren't fighting are going to
be
able to reap most of it. I could use associates in many of the
undertakings
I'll be contemplating."

"You have the effrontery to suggest an association, after I made that
terrible mistake once already?"

"No, but if you should someday choose to make it, I will listen."

Vasarius said, "I have heard enough. I will return to my cabin."

"Think on this, then, my lord," said Roo as the Quegan walked away.

"There will be a great many men needing transport across the sea to
Novindus, and there are few ships able to carry them. The fees for
such

transport will not be trivial."

Vasarius paused the briefest instant, then continued walking, until
he

disappeared down the ladder to the main deck and the cabins below.

Roo turned and looked out at the star-filled night, watching the
whitecaps

on the water. "I've got him!" he whispered to himself.

Jimmy felt as if someone had kicked in his ribs. It hurt to breathe
and

someone was tugging at his collar. A distant voice said, "Drink
this.' I

Something wet touched his lips and he felt cool water fill his mouth
and he drank reflexively. Suddenly his stomach knotted and he spewed
forth the water, convulsing as strong hands held him.

His eyes were stuck shut. His head rang and his back felt as if his

He passed out.

Some time later, he woke up again, and found that a half-dozen armed men had set up a camp. One sat near by and said, "Do you feel up to drinking some more water?"

Jimmy nodded and the man brought him a cup of water. Jimmy drank and suddenly was terribly thirsty. He drank more, and after the third cup, the man took away the waterskin, saying, "No more. For a while at least. "

Jimmy said, "Who are you?" His voice sounded dry and distant, as if it was being used by a stranger.

"My name is Captain Songti. I recognize you. You're the one called Baron James."

Jimmy sat up and said, "It's Earl James now. I got a new office." He glanced around and saw the sun was rising in the east. "How long?"

"We found you an hour after sunset. We had been preparing to make

camp a short distance from here, and as is my practice, I had a rider sweep the perimeter. He saw your campfire. When we rode over to investigate,

we found you lying there. There was no blood,-so we thought you might have sickened on food."

"I was poisoned," said Jimmy. "In wine. I drank little."

The Captain, a round-faced man with a short beard, said, "A fine palate. It saved your life."

"Malar wasn't trying very hard to kill me. He could have cut my throat easily enough."

"Perhaps," said the Captain. "Or he could have fled against our arrival

. He may have been gone only minutes before we arrived. He could have heard us before we saw him. I don't know."

and ready to return."

"Three days ... II Jimmy said. He said nothing a moment, then said,

"Help me walk to the creek."

"May I enquire why?" asked the Captain.

"Because I need to bathe. And wash my clothing."

The Captain said, "I understand, but we would do well to return to Port Vykor as quickly as possible, so you may recover in comfort."

"No, because after I bathe I have other business."

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iii need to find someone," said Jimmy as he looked down the

southeastern

road, "and then I need to kill him."

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Owen swore. "We were taken like bumpkins at the fair."

Subai, still covered with road dirt and exhausted from days of

nonstop

riding, said, "Patrick was correct. They let us have Sarth, and while

they

were taking LaMut, they built that."

"That" was an impressive series of earthen barricades running from

a steep hillside that was impossible to scale by anything less

surefooted

than a mountain goat down to the cliffs overlooking the sea. The

woods

for almost a thousand yards had been cleared, with low stumps left to

confound any attempt at organizing a cavalry charge. The only break

in

the structure was a huge wooden gate across the King's Highway,

easily

as big as the northern city gates in Krondor.

Erik counted. "I see at least a dozen catapults back there."

Subai said, "That's a nasty piece of work."

Greylock was forced to agree. "Let's talk about this."

They moved away from the forward position, past the arrayed company, s Of Kingdom soldiers ready to attack if the order was given. In a

clearing a hundred yards behind the front lines, they gathered. Owen said,

"I don't see any easy way through that."

Erik said, "Agreed, but what has me worried is how many more positions

like that we may face as we travel up the coast to Quester's View."

Owen said, "We might ask our guest." He indicated a position to the rear where General Nordan and some other key captains of Fadawah's army were being guarded. Most of the captives from Sarth were still under

guard in that town, but the officers were accompanying Greylock's command

company. Owen and the others walked over toward a pavilion being erected for the officers and waved the guards near Nordan to bring him

over.

Nordan reached the tent just as table and chairs were being placed for

Greylock to sit. He did so, letting Erik and the very tired Subai also sit,

but he kept Nordan standing,. "Now," Greylock said, "how many of these

defensive positions can we expect between here and Quester's View?"

Nordan shrugged. "I do not know. Fadawah did not see fit to keep me informed of what was occurring behind my lines." He glanced around.

sat. "Once the assault on Krondor was underway, I was going to ride down, watch a bit of the battle, ride north, and make a decision on fortifying

the town or withdrawing north. You neglected to assault Krondor, so of course, I never got to make that decision."

"Lord Duko thought a change in allegiance seemed propitious,vv said Subai. "Without his cooperation, we never would have taken Sarth so easily.~

"Lord Duko," said Nordan, as if weighing the sound of it. "He is now a Kingdom man, then?"

"That he is. He has command of our southern border with Great Kesh," replied Greylock.

"Would it be possible," asked Nordan, "for another such accommodation to be made?"

Owen laughed. "Duko had an army and a city to offer. What do you bring to the table?"

Nordan said, "I was afraid it would be something like that."

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"Well," said Erik, "if you think those on the other side of the barricade

would surrender on your word, we might be able to find sufficient incentive to make your future here more pleasant."

"Von Darkmoor, isn't it?" asked Nordan.

Erik nodded. "You know me?"

"We were looking for you long enough when your Captain Calis took his Crimson Eagles and turned renegade. We knew of the one who looked like a Long Lived, and we knew of the big young blond sergeant who fought like a demon. The Emerald Queen may have been a servant of darkness, but she had clever men among her officers."

Nordan grew reflective. "Kahil was one of her men, yet he managed

subcaptain, and when Fadawah started her own company, I was her

When he became a general, I was his second-in-command. When he met the woman known as the Emerald Queen and swore dark oath to her, I went along."

Subai looked at Erik, who nodded, and said, "I think we need to know of this man, Kahil."

Nordan said, "He was one of her captains. We met him when she sent for Fadawah and arranged for him to take command of her forces.

I thought it strange that she would seek us out when she already had commanders, but the money was good and she proposed conquests that would do nothing but make us rich beyond imagining.

"Kahil specialized in sneaking inside of cities before we attacked them., gathering information and sowing discord among the populace.

He spent more time with the Emerald Queen than anyone save Fadawah, and those men she called her Immortals, the men who willingly died in her bed to feed her hunger."

"You knew of that?" asked Erik.

"You hear things. You try to ignore anything that distracts you from the task at hand. I was her sworn Captain, and until I either was released

from duty, captured or killed, I would not betray her."

"Understood," said Erik.

"When the chaos around Krondor revealed that we had been somehow,, tricked by a demonic creature and that the Emerald Queen was no longer our true mistress, we were left to fend for ourselves. Fadawah is

an ambitious man. Kahil is also an ambitious man. I suspect it was he who proposed to Fadawah that my fate be much the same as Duko's.

"I was led to believe that we would keep a soft center in Sarth , with

skills."

Owen said, "We'll have to decide what to do with you later, General. For the moment, I have the problem of getting up north and getting the

Duchy of Yabon back for my King."

Nordan stood. "I understand, Marshal. I will by force of circumstances

await your pleasure."

Greylock signaled to a guard to return the captive General to the company of the other officers. After he was out of hearing range,

Owen said, "He said one thing that disturbs me."

"What?" asked Erik.

"That remark he attributed to this Kahil: 'All was going according to plan.' ~

Subai said, "I came up through the basement of the abbey. I saw nothing we need to fear."

"I don't think he meant the abbey," said Owen. "I think he meant some larger scheme that Fadawah is hatching."

Erik said, "All of which we will learn in due time."

Owen pointed his finger at his old friend. "That's what has me fearful."

He pointed at the tabletop. He motioned for food to be brought and servants hurried to comply. To one of the junior officers standing nearby

he said, "Let me know when all the commanders report their units are in

place.1~

Erik was silent a moment, then said, "We could hit them at night."

"At night?" asked Subai.

Erik's tone indicated he didn't strongly advocate the idea, but was rather just speculating. "If we could get close to the barricade

before they

"Subai, can you see any way to get some of our soldiers around the hillside end of the barricade?"

"A few maybe," answered the Captain. "But not enough to do more than get them all killed when they were discovered. If my Pathfinders were to do it, we could get up there and be in position before we were discovered, I'm certain."

"But you have to be on your way north, carrying messages," said Owen. "No, gentlemen, this time we must walk up and kick down the door. See to your men."

Erik stood up. "I'll inspect the deployment."

Owen motioned for Erik to stay, and when the other officers were gone, he said, "Can you get some men on the beach below those cliffs?"

"I can get them down to the beach, but I don't know if I can get them up the cliffs," said Erik.

"Then you'd better get down there and see, before you lose the daylight.

If you can get a squad up those cliffs and over the top before they

see you coming, you could spring that gate from the inside."

Erik considered it. "It is closer to the cliffside than the hillside by a

hundred yards or so, isn't it?"

"Think you can do it?"

Erik said 'IT +

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Let me go down and take a look. I'll be back as soon as possible."

move from Surin Northward had been as a forced march and the quartermasters had been pressed to their limit to get provisions together and underway on short notice. Yet here was the bulk of the Armies of the West, nearly eight thousand men under arms in the van, with another ten thousand less than a week behind, moving into locations preselected by (Owen's staff. Logistics was still more an abstract concept to Erik than

a real one. His time on the road had been in Calis's small companies in Ilidus, or in defensive positions in Krondor and Darkmoor. This was his first experience having responsibility for large numbers of men on the march.

The dust was almost overwhelming from the thousands of men, wagons, and horses moving along both sides of the road. He knew he could ride freely down the cliffs to the coast and no enemy spotter would be able to see anything that would give away his inspection of the beach area.

He found the path leading down to a cove a mile behind the lines and led the patrol downward. The road narrowed as it wound down to the beach, so they rode single file.

They halted while Erik looked up and down the coast. He turned to the men Jadow had gathered, and said, "Any good swimmers here?" Two of the men held up their hands, and Erik grinned at Jadow. "Oh, no, man. Not since we had to swim that river to get to Maharta." Erik jumped down and began removing his armor. "This time we won't have to wear eighty pounds of iron." Jadow dismounted and, muttering

swimming through the surf as if he pounds those rocks.

The men followed, and Erik led them out until the waves started to break. He dove under a breaking wave and came up behind it. He struck out away from the beach, and when the water was merely surging back and forth, turned on a course that ran along the beach. The water was cold despite the time of the year, and the going difficult, but after a few

minutes, Erik saw that he had left his partner behind. He waited and let

the man catch up, then started swimming again. They drew even with the

first of a series of small coves, and stopped, letting the others catch up

and tread water a moment. He said, "We need to swim about another mile, then head in." He pointed. "The beach seems to open up over

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

stood up in knee-deep water. He looked around and saw the other three men also riding waves in, though Jadow seemed to have swallowed a fair

amount of water on the way.

Erik glanced up to the cliffs. He motioned and said, "I think we're between our lines and theirs." Looking up and down the coast, he said,

..It's difficult to tell."

After a moment to catch his breath, he continued, "Come on. We're going to have our work cut out for us to get back before dark."

Jadow groaned.

"What?" asked Erik.

"Man, I just didn't even think; we've got to swim back, don't we?"

Erik and the other men laughed. "Unless you want to stay down here."

back, looked upward and finally said, "No luck."

"Can it be done?"

"Possibly, but it's a job for the Pathfinders. They are very good at that sort of thing."

"The Pathfinders are going around the eastern end of the line, up the hills and north; Subai's got messages to get to Yabon."

"Well, then, do we have anyone else in camp who might be foolish enough to swim over here and climb those rocks for a little hand-to-hand

mayhem?

Erik looked at Jadow, then said, "I think I may have just the lot."

there. "

Owen said, "Let me get this straight. You want me only to hit them

Jadow said, "I can't tell; all I see is breaking surf and rocks. with Probing attacks tomorrow?"

"Well, avoid the rocks," said Erik, setting out again with powerful Erik Pointed along the line of defense freshly drawn on Owen's map.

strokes. oward more rocks, "We're going to bleed if we storm that wall. We can put that off a day

He led them around a second point of land and t

He stopped and pointed. "There! A section of open beach."

'wO longer. But if I can get

up over the cliff, open the gate so you can

I And we'll save a lot of

He swam straight in toward the breakers, catching one to ride in, and get inside, we can shorten this attack by days.

men s lives."

"But if you don't get to the gate, you're going to get yourself chopped

this
morning. They're the best climbers we have."
Owen nodded approval. "That they are. And a handy bunch with a
sword, as I recall."
"Very."
"Well, I was going to send them along the ridge route, but if I give
Subai all the Pathfinders, he stands a better chance of getting
through to

Yabon."
"I haven't read the rolls of the fallen. How many Pathfinders have we
left?y~
"Too few. We have too few of everyone," said Owen. "We lost more
men of quality at Darkmoor and Nightmare Ridge than the Gods should
fairly ask of us. We are moving with the heart of the Army of the
West,
and if we fall, there's nothing left." He sighed. "Subai has fourteen
Pathfinders
left in his entire command."

"Fourteen?" Erik shook his head and his expression was one of regret.
"He had over a hundred before the war."

"Those trackers and scouts are rare men," said Owen. "You don't
train them overnight like your band of cutthroats."

Erik smiled. "MY cutthroats have proven themselves more times than
any other unit in this army. And we've lost more of the Eagles than I
care to think about." For a moment he reflected on the men whom he
had served with during two voyages to Novindus, Luis and Roo, Nakor
and Sho Pi, and those fallen at the battles along the way-Billy

Goodwin,
who fell off his horse and broke his head, Biggo the pious brawler,
and
Harper, who was twice the sergeant Erik had ever been, among many
ill
others. And most of all, one man. "As much as I wish Calis was st'

I want to find that ice cave and bring Bobby home."

Owen said, "Men have done crazier things before. But dead is dead, and buried is buried, Erik. Of all the men who fell, why Bobby?"

"Because he was Bobby? Most of us wouldn't be alive today save for what he taught us, we in the Eagles. Calis was our Captain, but Bobby was our soul."

I Well, if you can get the Prince to release you from duty for a time,

maybe you can do it. Me, I'll be asking him to promote you again to take

some weight off my shoulders."

"Thanks, but I'll refuse."

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Owen said, "Why? You've got a wife, and I expect someday children, and a promotion means more money as well as rank."

"I'm not worried about money. I mean, I have enough, even if the investments that Roo's made for me don't work out. I'll take care of Kitty

and any children, but I just don't want to become a staff officer."

Greylock said, "There won't be much need for captains once the war is over, Erik. The nobility will again come to the fore and start taking care

of keeping the peace."

Erik shook his head. "I don't think that's wise. I think the Riftwar and this war show we need a larger standing army. With Kesh again making moves along the South, and with as many casualties as we've taken, I think the Prince needs more men under arms at all times than we've had before here in the West."

"You're not the first to say that," said Owen, "but the politics ... the

nobles will never stand for it."

man average bunch.

Erik rose, saluted casually, and departed. When he was gone, Owen looked at the map and said to the orderly, "Send for Captain Subai, please. "

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Raymond E. Feist

SHAP,DS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Jimmy pointed. "Up there." He had commandeered a horse and sent two men back to Port Vykor, riding double. He had ordered the other ten men to accompany him in his pursuit of Malar, and he knew the spy had only one possible destination.

Jimmy was certain now that Malar Enares was a Keshian spy. A simple thief would have taken Jimmy's weapons and gold. He only took Jimmy's horse to have a spare as he fled to Keshian lines. The fact he

had first taken the Prince's orders to Lord Duko was the single most indicting evidence.

Captain Songti and the other men looked uncertain about the young noble's orders, but they obeyed. As they stopped to rest their horses,

Songti said, "Lord James--"

"Jimmy. My grandfather was Lord James."

"Lord Jimmy," amended Songti.

defile

that empties out at the oasis of Okateo. Very popular with smugglers."

"And spies," suggested Songti.

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"If you know of this place, sir, why not keep a garrison there?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Because we find it as useful to keep open as the Keshians do."

"I don't think I'll ever understand this society of yours, sir.Y)

"Well, when the war is over, you may return to Novindus should you ,vshh."

Songti said, "I am a soldier and I have served Lord Duko most of my life. I wouldn't know what to do back in Novindus. None o us

would." ~;A;ncw "Well assure a the

Jimmy motioned it was time to resume

sun rises in the east, there are those down in Novindus building their own

little empires as much as Fadawah is here."

"Some of the younger men might wish to return," said Songti as he

remounted. "But most of us who have been with Duko for a while will make lives here, in your Kingdom."

"Then it's time for you to begin thinking of it as our Kingdom."

"So my lord Duko instructs," admitted Songti as he motioned the patrol forward.

They rode up a dusty trail, into plateau country, long rolling vistas of

dust, tough dry plants, and sun-bleached rock. A dry wind struck, and grit

anger said, "From here on a clear day you can see the sea," I think.

"More," said Jimmy. "On a very clear day I have been told you can see the peaks of the Calastius Mountains to the north." He urged his horse forward and they continued, moving upward.

Night found them resting in a large pass, sheltered from the wind and sand. They sat on the rocks, their saddles behind them or under their feet.

The horses were staked out a short way away. Jimmy ordered a cold camp against the possibilities others were nearby, or that Malar was looking over his shoulder.

Jimmy knew that he stood a fair chance of overtaking the spy if he didn't know his way through these hills as well as Jimmy. He might have been a boy in far Rillanon, but his grandfather made sure he and his brother knew every weakness along the border with Kesh: smugglers' coves, trails, goat paths, creeks, and gaps in the mountains. And Lord James's knowledge had been encyclopedic, Jimmy remembered; he had made sure his grandsons knew of every potential attack corridor into the Kingdom.

Chewing jerked beef, Captain Songti said, "Are you certain we'll catch this spy?"

"We must. He stole orders to Duko and knows too much about the lack of defenses in Krondor. The orders also detail our plan for dealing with the threat to Land's End."

"We have encountered a few of these Keshians. They are determined fighters. "

"Keshian Dog Soldiers are not known for cowardice. Occasionally their leaders are, but if they're ordered to fight to the last man, they will.

him and said, "Wake me just before."

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Akee and his men spread out along the base of the cliff. Erik said, "what's the best way to proceed?"

They had carried bundles of weapons and dry clothing wrapped in oil-treated canvas, swimming the route Erik had previously discovered.

The plan was to get to the top of the cliff in the darkness, and just before

dawn, Subai's Pathfinders, as well as a few dozen Krondorian regulars,

would make as much noise as possible at the far end of the defenders' wall, hoping to make them think the Kingdom forces were attempting to circle the barricades on the hillside. They would retreat as soon as engaged,

with Subai and his Pathfinders climbing the steep hillside and up into the mountains. Once past this barrier, they'd start their journey along

the western slopes of the mountains, making their way to Yabon. The Krondorians would retreat with a lot of noise, apparently in disorder.

The hope was this would allow the Hadati and Erik to slip in behind the defenders and reach the gate. If they could get it open, Greylock promised they only had to hold it for two minutes. He had two companies

of cavalry, light bowmen who could cross the gap in less than two minutes, and a company of one hundred heavy lancers, who could sweep behind the line and clear the wall of defenders.

From above the cliffs came the sounds of men shouting as Greylock's probing attacks were withdrawn. The defenders had been dealing with

should be able to reach the top of the cliffs with a rope to hang on to,
Captain."

Erik said, "I am flattered by your confidence in me."

The man named Pashan took off his weapons, the long blade most Hadati carried over their backs, and the short blade carried at the belt. HO

was short, compact, and his arms and legs looked powerful. He stripped

off his soft buckskin boots and handed everything to a companion' He took the light cord and carefully coiled it around his chest and shoulder, so he wore it like the plaid most Hadati wore when sporting clan dress.

The bulk of it trailed behind him to a coil resting on the sand. Akee had

instructed the men to be careful it uncoiled without any hitch, lest Pashan

be pulled off balance by unexpected resistance.

Pashan adjusted his kilt and started to climb. Erik glanced to the west.

The sun had set a few minutes earlier, and now they were watching a brave man carefully scale a cliff face in failing light. It would be dark

before he safely reached the top.

The minutes dragged by and upward the man climbed, each hand and foot moved carefully, testing the grip or footing. Like a fly on a wall, he

moved slowly upward, slightly to the right of his starting point.

Erik was amazed. At first he was twenty feet above, then thirty, then

rocks, then he caught sight of movement; Pashan was now two-thirds of the way to the top of the cliffs.

Again he vanished into the gloom and the minutes dragged by. As

the night deepened into darkness-no moons would rise until near dawn this night-finally the cord began to jerk up and down.

"Tie the rope," instructed Akee.

The remaining cord was cut and tied tightly around the end of a much heavier rope. When it was secured, they tugged three times firmly on the

cord. Pashan rapidly pulled the rope upward.

The rope continued to pay out, then jerked up and down again. The first jerks had been the signal Pashan had reached the top of the cliffs and

to tie the rope. The second signal indicated either he had tied off the rope,

or he was now digging in to hold it. The second man up the rope would be the smallest remaining. He would join with Pashan and hold the end.

Each man after would add his strength as the larger men climbed.

The second man had his weapons tied in a bundle slung over his back and started up hand over hand, using his feet to boost him along the surface of the rocks. Erik was amazed at how fast he climbed.

Then the third man went up.

The night's silence was cut by the distant sounds from the enemy's

camp, but not alarms or the sounds of fighting. Slowly the squad of fifty

Hadati hillmen reached the summit, and at last Erik and Akee were alone

on the beach.

"I'll go after you," said Erik.

pulled up.

Akee reached over the edge of the cliff, took Erik by the wrist, and with a yank hauled him up to safety. With a whisper, he said,

"Someone
comes.t)

Erik nodded, pulling his belt knife out and looking around. They were in a sparse stand of trees, pines and aspens, and as far as he could tell,

he and Akee were alone. The other Hadati had somehow managed to vanish into the woods.

Akee quickly moved to cut off the rope tied to a tree nearby and cast the remnants off the cliff. Then he pulled Erik away and they slipped off

into the woods.

From a short distance he heard men walking, and one spoke in the language of Novindus. "I don't hear nothing."

"I tell you, I thought I heard something, like someone moving around."

"There's no one here," came the first voice.

Erik hugged the side of a small oak, glancing through the lower branches of a pair of star pines as two figures emerged from the other side

of the clearing. One carried a torch. "This is a fool's errand."

"Then you're just the man for the job," said the other.

"Very funny." They reached the clearing before the cliffs and the first

man said, "That's a long way down, so don't get too close."

"Don't need to tell me, lad. I have no love for heights."

"Then how did you get up the wall at Krondor?"

"Didn't," said the second man. "I waited for them to blow up the walls and walked in."

"You were lucky," said the first man. "See, no one here. "at did you think? Someone was sending monkeys climbing them cliffs, or some

only six or seven times, so spare me . . .
The voices faded off into the night. From behind Erik heard a voice say, "They think the woods empty."
"Good," said Erik to Akee. "Then we can wait until just before first light to make our move."
Erik said, "Spread the word. Have the men stay where they are, out of sight. We gather an hour before dawn."
Akee vanished into the gloom without a word.

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Seventeen

JIMMY POINTED.

Captain Songti said, "I see them."
They were scouting out the well at Okatio oasis, and lounging in the shade of the desert willows was a patrol of Keshian soldiers.
"Those are Imperial Borderers," whispered Jimmy. "See those long lances?"
Leaning against the rocks near where the horses were staked out, rested twenty long slender spears with banners attached. Songti said,
"Looks like we want to get in close, fast."
"Yes," said Jimmy. "No archers."
"Is that your man?" asked Songti, pointing at a figure on the far side of the campfire.
"That's him," said Jimmy. Malar was sitting next to a Keshian officer, who was examining the bundle of dispatches Jimmy had been carrying to

Jimmy grinned. "The best horsemen in Triasia?"

"Not since we got here," said Songti. He turned and signaled. His men were hanging back down the trail. They slowly moved forward. Jimmy said, "As soon as you attack, Malar is going to jump on the nearest horse and ride that way." He pointed to a pass to the south,

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leading down into the borderlands of Kesh. "Let me get over there, and

if he does, I'll jump him from those rocks."

Songti said, "I'll go with you. He might bring a friend."

"Ignore the friend unless it's that officer looking at those documents.

First thing we must do is get them back and kill any man who reads them.II

"That makes it easy," said Songti. "We'll just have to kill them all."

Jimmy admired the man's confidence. There was a full patrol of

twenty Keshian Borderers taking their ease around the well, and only ten

Kingdom soldiers with Jimmy. Jimmy said, "Hit them fast." He got up and in a crouching run skirted the rocks above the oasis until he was poised above the point he had indicated.

Songti communicated with his men using hand signals, then came and stood beside Jimmy.

Suddenly chaos erupted at the oasis and men shouted. While outnumbered

, the Kingdom soldiers were given the advantage of surprise. Without looking, Jimmy knew men were dying before they reached their

hairs were flying and Jimmy sucked his shoulder, falling on the ground and coming to his feet with a grunt of pain. He had struck a rock outcropping and could feel his left arm going numb. He knew instantly he had dislocated his shoulder.

Another horse appeared and Songti jumped out, sweeping a rider from his saddle, and Jimmy barely dodged the second horse as it raced by. He turned, trying to find Malar, and saw the spy attempting to flee down the trail after the horse.

Clutching his sword in his right hand, his left dangling limply at his side, Jimmy ran after him, past Songti, who was sitting astride the chest

of a Keshian, choking the life from him. Malar reached a bend in the trail, and Jimmy lost sight of him. He hurried after, and as he rounded the bend, pain exploded in his left shoulder.

Malar had climbed aboard a boulder and had kicked him hard, aiming for his head, but striking his shoulder instead. The effect was nearly the

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process,
but over the years I've discovered it was worth it. I would love to continue our discussion, but I hold no confidence that your men will be delayed much longer, so I must leave." He was holding only a dagger, but he advanced as if confident Jimmy and his sword would be no match. Years of training, back to when he was a boy learning at the knee of his grandfather, took over, and Jimmy leaped to his right, just as Malar let loose an underhand cast, lightning swift, with his left hand, and a previously unseen dagger glanced off the rocks where Jimmy had stood a moment before. Jimmy knew this man would have several blades secreted upon his person. As Jimmy expected, when he turned to confront Malar, the spy was already hurling himself at Jimmy, daggers in both hands. Jimmy fell over backward, enduring further searing agony in his left shoulder as he avoided Malar's assault. Jimmy kicked out with his right leg as Malar closed on him, knocking him off balance. The spy's leg was rock hard and Jimmy was certain he'd find the man's slender build had been misleading; this was not a skinny weakling he fought. Wasting no time, Jimmy rolled upright and struck hard with his sword. Malar barely avoided the blow and rolled away, ignoring the sharp rocks that littered the trail. Jimmy pressed on, not allowing this dangerous foe the chance to collect himself, not while Jimmy had only one good arm. He swung down

Suddenly a horse almost ran Jimmy down, hooves flying, as it raced by. Jimmy got up as quickly as he could and realized he no longer held a sword. The bleeding Keshian spy grinned like a crazed wolf as he crouched low, holding his remaining dagger in his right hand. "Don't move, young noble, and I'll make this quick and painless." He took a step toward Jimmy, who countered with a handful of dirt to Malar's eyes. Malar turned away, blinded by the dust, and Jimmy leaped to grip Malar's wrist with his good right hand. Summoning as much strength as he could, he tried to crush Malar's wrist by sheer willpower. Malar grunted in pain, but didn't let go of the dagger. As Jimmy had suspected, the Keshians slight build hid steel-like strength, and nothing as trivial as a broken wrist would distract him. Malar pulled back, Jimmy still holding his right wrist in his own right hand. With his left fist, Malar struck a backhanded blow to Jimmy's shoulder. Jimmy cried out in pain and felt his knees buckle. He nearly lost consciousness as Malar struck him in the left shoulder again, and felt the strength draining out of him. Malar drew back and wrenched his wrist free of Jimmy's grasp, and in one motion deftly tossed his dagger from left to right hand. For an instant Jimmy looked up as Malar stood above him, poised to deliver a death blow, a vicious backhand stab with his left hand. Malar's eyes widened in shock, and he looked down. The dagger fell from his fingers and his hand went around behind his back, and he turned,

backward,

banging himself against the rocks.

Songti knelt and said, "Are you hurt?"

"I'll live," Jimmy croaked. "My shoulder's dislocated."

"Let me see," said the Captain. He gently touched the shoulder and pain shot through Jimmy's body, from waist to jaw. "Just a moment,"

said the Captain, then with a sure move, he gripped the upper portion of

Jimmy's arm and clamped his other hand down on the shoulder and

,shoved the arm back into position.

Jimmy's eyes widened and watered and he could barely catch his

breath, then the pain passed.

Songti said, "Better to do it soon, before things swell and you can't

get it back in. Then you need a healer or priest, or a great deal of brandy.

"You'll be better tomorrow."

"If you say so,,, jimmy replied weakly.

"I got the second rider, but there was a third."

"He almost ran me down," said Jimmy as Songti helped him to his feet.

"It was the officer."

Jimmy swore. "Are the messages to Duko still over there?"

The archer looked around and saw the leather pouch, reached down, and held it up. "It's here."

Songti waved the man over, and he handed the bundle to the Captain.

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Songti pulled out the documents and said, "There are seven papers here."

"That's all of them," said Jimmy. He looked down at the dead spy

and said, "That was too close."

Songti motioned for the archer to give Jimmy a steadying hand. "We

must bury the dead. If there's another patrol nearby and they see res

circling, they might come to investigate in the morning."

up at Land's End or in the vale is up north facing Fadawah."

"These Keshians would press the advantage?"

Jimmy said, "Indeed they would. One quick strike up to the city and they hold Prince Patrick. The King would grant them much to reclaim his son."

Songti said, "It was simpler when we lived in Novindus."

Jimmy laughed, though it hurt him to do so. "No doubt," he said as he leaned on the archer and hobbled back to the oasis.

Erik heard the Hadati moving before he saw him appear out of the gloom. Akee said, "It's almost time."

They had remained hidden through the night in the woods behind the barricade blocking the highway. Twice mercenaries had wandered close to where Erik waited, but none bothered to check the woods on the cliffs.

Erik nodded. The sky to the east was getting lighter. Soon, if all went

according to plan, a feint at the far end of the barricade would give Erik

his opportunity to strike from behind and open the gate. "Let's look around a little," said Erik.

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

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He crouched low and moved through the trees until he reached the clearing south of the highway. He gauged the distance to the gate at over a hundred yards, and counted a dozen low-burning campfires between his

Erik pointed. "I'll be somewhere out there."

Erik wore his black uniform, but without his Crimson Eagle tabard.

To any casual observer he might pass as a mercenary given to wearing black. Glancing at Akee, he noticed a blue band around the warrior's brow. "Is that something I might borrow from you?" he asked, not knowing

if it might have some sort of tribal significance.

Akee didn't answer. He reached up and untied the band, then stepped behind Erik and tied the headband in place. Now Erik looked even less like a Kingdom regular.

Erik cautiously stepped out between two campfires, walking carefully so as not to wake sleeping men. Soft voices from the barricade told him

the guards on duty were gossiping or telling stories to keep awake.

Erik reached the edge of the road and his manner changed. He walked briskly as if he was about important business. He moved boldly down the

road and reached the gate. As he approached, he noted the construction

of the gate. It was simple, but effective. The gates each had one large iron

bracket affixed to them by huge iron bolts. Through those brackets, an

Oak bar had been passed, and that was braced in turn by long poles driven

into the ground. It should be easy to knock aside the poles and run the

bar out of the brackets, but it would take a sizable ram to knock it open

from the other side.

"Hey! " he said, before he could be challenged. He kept his voice deep,

hopefully disguising his accent as he spoke the invaders' dialect.

his way slowly but purposefully toward the command tent, then, just before approaching too closely, he veered away and walked between camps. Most of the men were sleeping; a few were rousing and stirring cooking fires, heading to nearby slit-trenches to relieve themselves, or already eating.

He absently nodded or gave a slight wave of greeting to a few he passed, furthering the illusion he was a familiar figure known to someone in the camp; if not the person looking at him, perhaps the man across the way to whom he was waving.

Erik reached a particularly quiet camp where only one man stirred, one who was brewing up coffee by the smell of it. Crossing over, he said,

"Have an extra cup to spare

The man looked up and nodded, motioning Erik over. Erik came over and knelt beside the warrior. "I've got a few minutes before I report to the gate, and can't find a hot cup anywhere."

"I know what you mean," said the soldier, handing an earthen mug filled with the black hot liquid to Erik. "You with Gaja?"

Erik recognized the name, a Captain he had heard of before, but he knew nothing about the man. "No," said Erik, "we just got here. My Captain is over there"-he indicated the command tent-"talking with Rastav, and I thought I'd sneak off and grab this." He stood.

"Thanks, I'll bring back the mug when my duty's over."

The soldier waved off the remark. "Keep it. We've looted enough crockery I'm thinking of opening a store.l\$

Erik strolled along, drinking his coffee, which wasn't too bad for camp

raised. Erik paused, and counted slowly to ten, until he heard a horn sounded, a call to arms. Men sprang up from where they slept, and Erik

tossed aside his cup and hurried along. In his most commanding voice he started shouting, "They're hitting the east flank! Get to the east!" Men who were half asleep started hurrying off toward the far end of

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

the line. As he neared the gate, a man hurried over and said, "What is this?"

Erik knew at once this was a Sergeant or Captain of some company, one not used to obeying mindlessly. "Rastavs orders. Are you Captain Gaja?"

The man blinked and said, "No, I'm Tulme. Gaja is due to relieve me in an hour."

"Then get two men in three off the gate and rush them to the eastern end of the line! The enemy is breaking through over there!"

Erik hurried along, and kept shouting, "Get to the east! Hurry up!"

Men saw other soldiers rushing off to where they were ordered, and hastened to obey. Erik ran back to where he could be seen by Akee and signaled. Instantly the Hadati hillmen were running from the trees.

Erik ran to the gate and shouted, "Orders! Open the gate. Get ready to sally!"

"What?" said a man. "Who are you?"

Erik had his sword out and killed the man before he could react. "My luck couldn't run forever," he said to Akee as the Hadati reached his side.

The Hadati killed every man standing before the gate before anyone more than twenty-five yards away noticed. The supporting poles were

suddenly men were charging at the Hadati, who were to a man armed with long swords and short swords, held in right and left hands respectively.

They moved out to keep enough room between each that they could do a maximum of damage. Erik hesitated only a moment, then ran and leaped atop a pile of grain sacks, and pulled himself up on the ramparts behind the breastwork. He could not afford for bowmen to get above the Hadati. If he did, the fight would be over.

Erik glanced to the south and saw the Kingdom cavalry was already on its way. One more minute and the day would be won.

Erik charged along the ramparts, and the first man he encountered looked confused, still trying to see what was occurring to the east. Erik

grabbed him and threw him off the rampart. He landed on top of a pair of men running along, and those behind stopped. A crossbow bolt sped past Erik's head and he ducked. '

. He retreated, weapons ready, and when he saw soldiers heading toward him, he halted. The first man to face him slowed, uncertain of what

was before him. Erik was happy to wait, and let the Kingdom cavalry reach the gate.

Abruptly a sense of alarm passed through those near the gate, as if they finally realized what had happened. They charged the waiting Hadati,

and the man opposite Erik let out a howl of rage and charged him.

Erik took a step back when the man swung, letting him overbalance himself, and with a swift kick, Erik sent the man tumbling over the side

of the rampart. The second man approached a little more cautiously, if

just as intently, and struck out. Erik took the blow on his sword and parried, then unexpectedly, he stepped into the man, slamming him in the

inflicting terrible injury on any who closed on them. With a look of disgust,

he threw down his blade.

A band of horsemen rode up from behind the line and were charged by Krondorian lancers as the second unit of cavalry swept in. A scaling

ladder slammed against the wall near Erik and he realized that Greylock

had hedged his bet by getting men close under cover of darkness. He glanced to his right and saw footmen racing across the open ground ahead.

Erik leaned out over the edge of the wall and almost got his head split

open as thanks. "Hey!" he shouted down to a Kingdom soldier halfway up the ladder who had just swung his sword at Erik. "Slow down! You might fall off and hurt yourself."

It was not what the soldier expected. He stopped, and the man behind him on the ladder shouted, "Keep moving."

Erik said, "You can climb back down and walk through the gate."

The man on the top of the ladder shouted, "Sorry, Captain yon Darkmoor."

Erik looked to the left and saw mercenaries throwing down their

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

swords and backing away as a line of lancers slowly advanced on them the points of their heavy weapons pointed at chest height.

Erik saw the light cavalry entering behind the lancers and recognized Jadow and Duga. He signaled to get their attention. Jadow rode close and Erik shouted, "Get things organized, and send word back to Greylock

them if he didn't intervene. He shouted for messengers to carry the word to the fight, before men died needlessly.

Erik jumped off the wall as the first Kingdom foot soldiers entered the gate. He pushed through the press of prisoners, and sought out the senior lieutenant of the light cavalry. "Go give the lancers a hand with that lot at the rear, then I want a sweep of the woods on both sides of the road for the next five miles. If anyone's cut and running north to tell Fadawah this position is fallen, I want them overtaken,"

The rider saluted, gave orders, and rode off, then Erik sought out Akee. "How are your men?"

"I have some injuries, but no one dead," said the leader of the hillmen. "

Had they a few more minutes to get organized, I think we would have seen otherwise."

"I think you are correct," said Erik.

He left the hillmen and turned as Jadow and Owen rode through the gate, and as he approached, he turned to a passing soldier and said, "Find a Captain among the prisoners, a man named Rastav, and bring him here. "

Owen looked around and said, "Another illusion?"

Erik said "Almost. If we hadn't gotten the gate open, we would have bled, but not as badly as we thought."

men saluted, then turned and began organizing the chaos behind
barricade.

Dash could barely contain his rage. A dozen of his constables were
standing around the room, looking from one to another, a few openly
frightened.

Two of his men lay dead before him. Sometime during the night they
had been waylaid and killed, their throats cut and their bodies
deposited

before the door of the New Market Jail.

Whispering, Dash said, "Someone's going to bleed for this."

The men were two recent recruits, Nolan and Riggs, and they had
just finished their training. The last month had been difficult for
Dash,

but as order returned to Krondor, he found that larger portions of
the city

were slowly getting back to a rhythm not unlike that known before the
war.

The Prince had authorized the purchase of a building just off the
Market Square, and the cells had just been installed by an iron
monger.

A near riot down near the docks the night before had taken the jail
to its

limit and Dash had been busy dragging malefactors off to the city
court,

established by the Prince the week before; two eastern nobles were
serving

as judges, and a lot of drunks were finding themselves sentenced to
the

labor gangs in a hurry. Most got a year, but a few were pulling five-
and

ten-year sentences, and the citizens of the more unruly areas of the
city

"Now all bets are off."

Since taking the office of Sheriff of Krondor, Dash had managed to keep hanging to a minimum. Two murderers had been publicly hanged five days before, but the majority of crimes had been relatively petty.

"What were these two doing down there anyway?" asked Dash.

"They were both new to the job."

Gustaf said, "The draw just came up that way." Lowering his voice,

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he said, "There's no one here with what you might call a great deal of

experience, Dash.

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swqeurend'tdodownntyh-ecrhe, eeked youths by

row.I)

"What about tonight?" asked Gustaf.

"I'll take care of tonight," said Dash, leaving the small squad room

He hurried down the street and made his way through the open market,

heading toward what had been the Poor Quarter. He kept his wits

about him and his eyes open. Even in the daylight he could count on

nothing but trouble in this part of the city.

Reaching a burned-out two-story building, he ducked inside. Quickly

he removed his red armband and ducked out the back of the building.

He

hurried down a narrow alley and climbed a wooden fence that was still

somehow standing between two stone walls while everything nearby had

been reduced to ash. Ducking under a low-hanging arch of stone he

reached his goal.

He crept through an open building, a small former business on the

inside.

The man yelled in terror, and started to beg, "Don't kill me! I didn't do it!PP

Dash put his hand over the little man's mouth and said, "Didn't do what, Kirby?"

When he saw he wasn't going to be instantly killed, the little man

relaxed. Dash removed his hand. "Whatever it was you think I did " said the little man.

"Kirby Dokins," said Dash, "the only thing you do is trade in information

. If you weren't so useful, I'd squash you like the bug you are."

The vile-smelling little man grinned. His face was a patchwork of scars

and blemishes. He was a beggar by trade, and an informant when opportunity

Presented himself. Like the cockroach he was, he had crawled into a crack in the stones and survived the destruction of the city "But you have use of me, don't you?"

"For the moment," conceded Dash. "Two of my men were dumped on the jail steps last night, their throats cut. I want those who did it."

"No one's bragging."

"See what you can find out, but at midnight tonight, I'll be *re, and

branch."

Kirby swallowed hard. "I'll pass that along, if it becomes appropriate."

Dash pushed the little man outside the door. "Go. Midnight," he

'~you better be as well, with names.

"That might prove difficult," said the snitch.

"Make it happen," said Dash, hauling the little man up so that Dash's almost touched Kirby's. "I don't need to make up crimes to get you

"hung. Keep me happy."

"I live to keep you happy, Sheriff."

"Exactly." He let go of the little man's shirt. "And pass word back to that old man."

"X^at old man?" asked Kirby, feigning ignorance.

"I don't have to tell you who," said Dash. "Tell him if this murder lands at his feet, any faint affection I might feel toward his merry band of

mummers will be gone forever. If they're his pranksters cutting throats,

he better serve them up to me, or the Mockers will be crushed, root and

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Eighteen

OWEN SQUIRMED.

He didn't seem able to find a comfortable position in his camp chair, and yet the situation demanded he sit for hours reviewing reports and communiques.

Erik approached, looming up out of the evening darkness against the campfires burning in every direction. He saluted. "We've interrogated the

captains, and they're as ignorant as the swordsmen they've hired."

"There's a pattern here, somewhere," said Owen. "I'm just too stupid to see it." He indicated that Erik should sit.

the best I can come up with is Fadawah has some
men
he wasn't really happy with, so he thought he'd turn them over to us
to
feed.')

"Well, if you hadn't opened that gate, we would have bled a bit
getting
over that wall," said Owen, hiking his thumb over his shoulder at
the large earthen breastwork behind his command pavilion.
"True, but we would have taken it in a day or two."
"I'm wondering why Fadawah is going to all the trouble of making
Is think he's down here and then letting us discover he isn't."
"I'm guessing," said Erik, "but if he's taken LaMut, he might be
moving south of Ylith now, getting ready for a counterattack."
'He can't ignore Yabon," said Owen. "As long as Duke Cari is up

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there with his army, Fadawah has to keep a strong face northward.
Carl
can get men in and out of there if Fadawah doesn't keep the pressure
on.
Even so, there are Hadati hillmen still up there who can probably
sneak
through his lines at will. And I'm sure the dwarves and elves aren't
proving
hospitable neighbors if his patrols wander too far from their current
position. No, he must take all of Yabon before he turns south."
"Well, he can't hope to slow us down with these little sham
positions."

toward
Ylith."

"And run into a meat grinder?"

Erik nodded. He pointed to details on the map. "There's this line of unforgiving ridges north of the road from Quester's View to Hawk's Hollow.

He holds both ends of the road, and if he keeps us off the ridge, he can dig in here." Erik's finger showed a particularly narrow point in the road about twenty miles south of Ylith. "Let say he sets up a series of fortifications, tunnels, catapults, arrow towers, the entire bag of tricks. We stick a boot into that mess too fast and we may draw back a bloody stump." His finger traced a line from that point up to the dot on the map representing Ylith. "He's got thirty-foot-high walls, and a single weak point, an eastern gate by the docks. That he can fortify, and if he sinks ships in the harbor mouth, he can sit inside the city like a turtle in its shell." The more he spoke, the more Erik was certain of his analysis.

"We can't land on the western shore; that's Free Cities land, and if we try it, Patrick risks alienating the only neutral party left on the Bitter Sea. Besides, to get there we'd probably run up against whatever warships Queg has in the area."

Owen sighed. "More to the point, our fleet needs to support the army on its western flank to make sure we're supplied and to carry the wounded

wait to see what Subai says when he gets word back to us."

"If he gets word back," said Erik.

"Let's cover our bet," said Owen.

"What?" asked Erik.

"I'm going to send an order to Admiral Reeves to send a fast cutter up the coast from Sarth. I want to see how far north he can get before

someone tries to discourage him."

Erik sat forward. "Care to bet it's about there?" he said, his finger stabbing at a point on the coast due west of Quester's View.

"No bet," said Owen. "I've come to appreciate your instincts."

Erik sat back in the chair. "I actually hope I'm wrong and Fadawah's all tied up outside of Yabon. I can imagine what I would do if I was building defensive fortifications along that route."

Owen said, "You have too much imagination. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

Erik looked at his old friend and said, "Not often enough." He stood and said, "I have things to see to. I'll report in when I've done talking to the rest of the prisoners."

"Supper is ready. Get back here before it's all gone." Owen added,

"I'll be here," and went back to his reports as Erik walked off.

Dash waited, and as the darkness deepened, he began to fume. It was already a quarter hour past midnight and Kirby hadn't put in an appearance.

He was about to start looking for him when he sensed someone was behind him. He slipped his hand over the hilt of his dagger and moved with a feigned casual motion, walking back toward the rear entrance of

the burned-out building.

AS soon as he slipped through the door, he stepped sideways, reaching

Dash grinned. "Sorry, but I'll bet you're as dangerous as you are beautiful."

SHAP,DS OF A BROKEN CPOWN

The woman pouted theatrically. "You flatterer."

Dash lost his smile. "I've got dead men and I want some answers.

Where's Kirby Dokins?"

"Dead," said the women.

Dash put away his dagger.

"Am I suddenly less dangerous?"

"No," said Dash, pulling the woman back inside the building. "But you wouldn't have been sent to tell me the Mockers killed my snitch."

"And?"

"That means you didn't kill my men."

"Very good, Puppy."

"Who did?"

"An old acquaintance of yours thinks there's a new gang moving into the city. Smugglers, maybe, though there doesn't seem to be a lot of new

goods in the market, if you know what I mean."

"I do," said Dash. The woman meant there wasn't a noticeable increase in drugs, stolen goods, or other contraband.

"Another Crawler?"

"You know your history, Puppy."

"That's Sheriff Puppy, to you," said Dash.

She laughed. It was the first time he had heard her laugh without mockery. It was a sweet sound. She said, "We're left alone, so if someone

is planning on moving into our territory, they're not ready to try yet.

"Our old friend said to tell you we don't know who killed your two lads, but you should know they weren't altar boys from the Temple of

"What killed Kirby?"

"We don't know," said Trina. "He was snooping around, being his usually pesky self, then suddenly about two hours ago, he turns up floating in the sewer."

'Where?'

"Five Points, near the big outfall below Stinky Street." Stinky Street

was Poor Quarter's slang for Tanners Road, where many odorous businesses

had resided before the war. Five Points was the name of a large confluence of sewers, three big ones, two small ones. Dash had never been

there, but he knew where it was.

"You working Five Points?"

"We're not up there, but don't ask me where we're working."

Dash grinned in the darkness. "Not yet, anyway."

"Not ever, Sheriff Puppy, not ever."

Dash said, "Anything else?"

"No," said Trina.

"Tell the old man thanks."

Trina said, "He didn't do it from love, Sheriff Puppy. We're just not ready to take on the crown. But he did tell me one other thing to tell

YOu.'

"What?"

"Don't make threats. The day you declare war on the Mockers, take your sword to bed with you."

Dash said, "Then tell my uncle that advice works both ways."

"Then good night."

"Lovely to see you again, Trina."

wrestle the
statue upright. Roo moved his own wagon over to the side of the road
and let those carts and wagons behind him pass. He jumped down and
crossed the road to where Nakor's wagon was parked.
"What are you doing?" he asked with a laugh.

Nakor said, "These fools are determined to destroy this work of art!"
Roo said, "I think they'll get it where you want it, but why do you
want it out here?" He made a sweeping motion with his hand,
indicating
a vacant field outside the gates of Krondor. A small farm had
occupied
this Plot of land, but the house had been destroyed and now only a
charred
square of foundation stones marked its passing.

,,I want everyone entering the city to see this,,, said Nakor as the
workers got the statue upright.

Roo paused. There was something about the woman's expression that
captivated the eye. He studied it for a long moment, then said, '
'it's really

very lovely, Nakor. Is that your goddess?"

"That's the Lady," said Nakor with a nod.

"But why not put her in the center of your temple?"

"Because I don't yet have a temple," said Nakor as he motioned for
the workers to return to the wagon. "I have to find a place to build
one."

Roo laughed. "Don't look at me. I already sprang for one warehouse
in Darkmoor. Besides, I don't own any buildings near Temple Square."

A gleam entered Nakor's eyes. "Yes! Temple Square. That's where
we need to build!"

"Builders I have," said Roo. Then he fixed Nakor with a narrow gaze.

"But I'm a little short on charity these days."

"Ah," said Nakor with a laugh. "Then you must have money. You're

"You catch on," said Roo. "Squatters seem to have a certain advantage if the real owner doesn't press a claim. I happen to know that the empty lot on the northwest corner of Temple Square, over by the Temple of Lims-Kragma, was owned by a former associate of mine. It was always a difficult piece of land to dispose of, being located between the Death Goddess's temple and the Temple of Guis-wa. Old Crowley tried to sell it to me once, and I declined. As Crowley is now among those who didn't survive the war, that land is unclaimed." Roo whispered, "He left no survivors. So it's you, some other squatter, or the crown who's going to get it."

Nakor grinned. "Being between the Death Goddess and the RedJawed Hunter doesn't bother me, so I'm certain it won't bother the Lady I'll go check it out."

Roo glanced back at the statue. "That's really quite good."

Nakor laughed. "The sculptor was inspired."

"I can believe it. Who modeled for it?"

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"One of my students. She's special."

"I can see that," said Roo.

As Nakor climbed back on his wagon, motioning for the workers to climb into the back, he said, "Where are you bound?"

"Back to Ravensburg. I'm rebuilding the Inn of the Pintail for Milo. With his daughter living in Darkmoor now, he's going to sell me half interest."

"You, an innkeeper?" asked Nakor with a disbelieving laugh.

heading east. Things were still difficult, but since capturing Vasarius, life had taken a turn for the better. He had discovered he really enjoyed his children, and Karli was quite a bit better company than he imagined when he married her. While no gold had been forthcoming from the crown since the winter, he knew that eventually he could use that debt to his own advantage. He needed a good base of liquid wealth, then he could turn the debt into licenses and concessions from the crown. Eventually peace between the Kingdom and Kesh would be achieved, and when that happened the profitable luxury trade would again be open, and now with Jacob Esterbrook dead, there would be no stranglehold on trade with the South. "Yes," Roo said softly to himself as he drove his wagon back to his boyhood home. Things were certainly taking a turn for the better.

Jimmy said, "If it gets much worse, we're going to lose everything." Duke Duko nodded. "Here we're locked up at Land's End." He pointed to the map. "It's as if they don't want to take the place, but they're reluctant to leave."

They occupied the largest room of the biggest inn in Port Vyor, a town that didn't exist five years before. Upon seeing the settlement, Jimmy was of the opinion that had the first Prince of Krondor wandered a little farther south those many years ago, this would be the site for the capital of the Western Realm, not Krondor. The harbor was commodious, opening into a calm bay that was relatively

the entire day, sleeping most of the time.

Duko had dispatched more patrols and now messengers were returning with the latest intelligence.

Jimmy had a very sore left shoulder, with a huge purple and blue bruise that was now turning green and yellow as it started to fade.

Several

small cuts had been dressed, and while feeling worse for the wear, he was

on the mend and knew that in a few days he'd be fit once more.

He had come to appreciate the former enemy General. Lord Duko was a thoughtful man who, had he been born in the Kingdom to a noble family, would have risen high, perhaps as high as to the very office in

which a capricious fate had placed him. Somehow that reassured Jimmy, knowing that a very important position in the Kingdom was being occupied

by a man of talent and intelligence.

Jimmy had not asked Duko what had been contained in the orders sent by Prince Patrick. He knew the Duke would inform him of what Jimmy needed to know, and nothing more.

Duko motioned Jimmy to another table, one which had been set with food and wine. "Hungry?"

Jimmy smiled. "Yes," he said, rising from his seat at the campaign table and moving, to where the food was.

"I have no servants," said Duko. "The ease with which your Keshian insinuated himself into the palace at Krondor makes me dubious of anyone

here I do not know. I'm afraid that has not endeared me to those officers who previously held posts here. Those that weren't called north,

tlo linirbor or down in Land's End."

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Jimmy nodded. "Not very politic, but very smart."

"I think you'll find me useful, sir. You are going to discover

yourself

subject to some scrutiny for the foreseeable future, and not all of
it from

the crown; many eastern nobles have sons and brothers whom they will
wish to insert into vacant offices here in the West. Several will no
doubt

show up here unannounced. Some will be honest volunteers, younger
brothers or sons looking to gain glory fighting Kesh, as did their
ancestors.

Others, however, will be seeking anything that can be used to
discredit

you, or another lord who is a rival to their lord, or simply to find
such

information to sell to interested parties. The politics of the
eastern court

is inherently lethal and complex. I can be of service in deflecting a
great

deal of such nonsense."

"I believe you," said Duko. "I am first a soldier, but you don't
become

one of the top generals in my homeland without some facility at
dealing with princes and rulers. They are in the main more concerned
with their own vanity than in truly finding solutions to problems,
and as

often as not I had to guard against those who would work against my
own interests within the court of my employer. We may not be all that
unlike, after all."

"Well, anyone who looks at the history of the Kingdom, Your Grace,
and thinks that for every victor there wasn't a vanquished, or that
an the

lands of the West embraced the Kingdom with open arms, is a fool. It

his escape may portend."
Jimmy nodded. "Malar was showing him the documents when we found them. He may have just been beginning to explain the significance
(f Your orders. If it's nothing more than 'Kronдор is vulnerable,' and the
Keshians think we'll reinforce due to the discovery of the spy, we may
aylid any problems up there. If he has any of the details of those messages
memorized, he'll be able to tell his masters we can't reinforce Kronдор."
Duko said, "If I could chase the Keshians out of Land's End, that would help.))

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Jimmy said, "Yes, it would, but without additional soldiers I can't see
how you can accomplish that. Enduring a siege is one thing, but mounting
an effective counteroffensive ... ?" He shrugged.
"With all that desert at their rear, I'm impressed how well the Keshians
are resupplying the army facing Land's End," admitted Duko. "if we could get part of the fleet down to intercept their shipping out of
of
Durbin, we might shake them loose, but short of that I have no idea
how

hear me say no. I've seen those marks the Keshian left on you."

"If I still feel the need after my walk my lord, I'll sleep a bit before supper.~)

Duko waved his permission to withdraw, and Jimmy left. The inn converted to headquarters was busy, with many clerks supporting the demands

of a headquarters command. Jimmy was amused at how the clerks and functionaries were rapidly overwhelming the far more casual approach

traditional to the mercenaries from across the sea. At most a Captain from Novindus had to worry about organization and logistics on the same level as a baron, a few hundred men at most. A general such as Duko rarely had more than a few thousand men under his command. Now, suddenly, these disorganized swords-for-hire were being forced into

acting like a tradition-bound, massively organized army. Jimmy suspected

more than one clerk would earn a black eye or broken head from a frustrated soldier from Novindus before this campaign was through.

If this campaign was ever through, thought Jimmy as he left the building to get a good look at Port Vykor.

The crack of whips echoed through the evening air. Subai recognized the sound, even at a distance. He had heard it often enough as a child, living in the hills outside of Durbin.

His grandfather had been a member of the nearly legendary Imperial Keshian Guides, the finest scouts and trackers in the Empire. He had taught his grandson every trick and skill he could, and when the slavers

mother
and, his father and grandfather's bones hacked to pieces, his

sister missing. Only eleven years of age, he had taken his few
possessions

and set out after the men who had done this.

By the time he had reached the Durbin docks, Subai had killed three

men. He had never found those who had taken his mother and sister,
and

Durbin was, if anything, more lethal an environment than the hills
nearby.

He stowed away on a ship bound for Krondor, and had stayed hidden for
the entire voyage.

Knowing nothing else, he had found his way to a village outside the
city, where he worked as a servant for a family who fed him and
clothed

him in exchange for work. At sixteen, he returned to Krondor and
enlisted

in the Prince's army.

By the time he was twenty-five, Subai was the leader of the
Pathfinders.

But now, ten years later, he still remembered the sound of the
slaver's

whip as it cracked through the air.

There were still five Pathfinders with him as they reached the area
east of Quester's View. Two had been dispatched south already,
carrying

faith in von Darkmoor, and knew his Crimson Eagles would take those Positions quickly.

Subai had left four of his Pathfinders high in the hills above where he

and his companion worked their way down steep hillsides to oversee the

sounds coming from the highway. Their horses were far enough above them now that they didn't worry about being discovered unless the two men blundered into a sentry.

Given the treacherous footing on the hills as they made their way down toward the coast, Subai doubted there even was a guard up here.

Each step was made slowly, so as not to dislodge stones and send a man

rolling down the mountain to his death.

The trees were thick enough there were ample handholds, but the

climb was difficult.

When they reached the edge of a high ridge, with a veritable cliff below them to another steep slope fifty feet below, Subai knew the effort

~. yn~;dxlng he withdrew a roll of fine parchment

.,.win nis tunic and removed a tiny box, along with some writing

sticks. With economy, he sketched what he saw before him and added a

few notes At the bottom he wrote a short commentary, then he put away

his writing implements. To his companion he said, "Study what you see

below."

They remained for a full hour, watching as slave gangs of Kingdom

citizens dug deep trenches along the route Greylock's army would have

and
wagons pulled by oxen slowly made their way toward the construction.
As night fell, Subai said, "We must be back up the hill else we're
stuck here through the night."

He stood and, as he took a step, heard his companion say, "Captain,
I(wk!Y9

Subai looked where the man pointed and swore. Along the road, as
far as the eye could trace, in the evening gloom, other lights burned
brightly; more forges and torches and tantalizing hints that told
Subai one

could fact. The Kingdom could not win this war fighting the way it
was.

He started up the hill, knowing that he would have to wait until
first light,
then begin a long report to Greylock. Then he would have to race
north

and reach Yabon before it fell. With LaMut, Zun, and Ylith in enemy
hands, Subai realized the King and Prince of Krondor did not realize
how

close they were to losing Yabon Province forever.

And should Yabon be lost, it would only be a matter of time before
the invaders turned south again and attempted to retake Krondor and
the

West.

Nineteen

WIND SWEPT THE beach.

Pug walked hand in hand with Miranda as the sun rose in the east.

They had been walking and talking all night and were close to
agreement

about several critical issues facing them.

"But I don't see why you have to do anything now," said Miranda.

of the Saaur. That's merely a symptom. It's the entire Issue of who is, at

the end, responsible for my power, me or the crown?"

"I understand," she said, "but why rush this decision? Why not wait until it's clear that you're being told to act against your conscience?"

"Because I want to avoid a situation where I'm faced with two evils, and must act to prevent the greater evil by embracing the lesser."

Miranda said, "Well, I still think you may be rushing things."

"I'm not about to fly to Krondor and explain my stance to Patrick until I've taken care of a few other things," Pug said.

They climbed over some rocks and picked their way among some tidal

pools. Pug said ' "When I was a boy in Crydee, I used to beg Tomas's father to let me go to the pools south of town, where I looked for rockclaws

and crabs; he made the best shellfish stew."

Miranda said, "Seems like a long time ago, doesn't it?"

Pug turned, a youthful grin on his face, and said, "Sometimes it seems

like ages, but other times it's as fresh in my mind as yesterday."

"What about the Saaur?" asked Miranda. "That problem won't go away by dwelling in the past."

Raymond*E. Feist

"For several nights, my love, I have been spending some time with one of the oldest toys in my collection."

"That crystal you inherited from Kulgan?"

"The very one. Fashioned by Athalfain of Carse. I've been scouring the globe and think I may have found a place to which we can move the

where are we? asked Miranda.

"The Ethel-du-ath, in the local tongue," said Pug.

The blue globe vanished, and they were struck by a hot summer wind.

"That sounds like Lower Delkian," said Miranda.

"The Duathian Plain," said Pug. "Come here."

He walked her a few hundred yards south and suddenly they were peering down the face of a towering cliff. Pug said, "Sometime ages ago,

this part of the continent rose up while that down there fell.

There's no

portion of this cliff face less than six hundred feet high. There are two or

three places you might climb, but I wouldn't recommend it."

Miranda stepped off into the air and continued walking. She turned and looked down. "That's quite a drop."

"Show-off," said Pug. "The lower portion of the continent was settled by refugees from Triasia, during the purging of the Ishapian Temple of

the Heretics of AI-maral."

"That's the same bunch that settled down in Novindus," said Miranda, walking back to solid ground. "No people up here?"

"No people," said Pug. "Just a million or so square miles of grasslands

rolling hills, rivers, and lakes, with mountains to the north and west, and

cWs to the south and east."

"So you want to put the Saaur here."

"Until I come up with a better solution," said Pug,.. ,This place is

large enough they can live here for several hundred years, if need be.

Eventually, I'll go back to Shila and rid that place of the remaining demons

Island. "Now who's being a show-off" she demanded, halfway between amusement and anger.

"I think I have the hang of it now," he said with a wry smile.

She playfully punched him in the arm. "You're not allowed to 'think' you have the hang of it. You damn well better know, unless you want to

see how quickly you can erect a protective spell when you're materializing

inside of rock!"

"Sorry," he said, his expression clearly showing he wasn't. "Let's get

back to the house."

"I could use some sleep," she said. "We've been talking all night."

"Lots of important things to discuss," he said, putting his arm back around her waist. They walked quietly for a short distance, up to the path

that led over the hill and back to the villa.

"I was a new Great One," Pug began, "and Hochopepa, my mentor in the Assembly, persuaded me to attend a great festival the Warlord

was orchestrating to honor the Emperor. And to announce a great victory over

the Kingdom." He fell silent, in remembrance. After a moment, he continued. "

Kingdom soldiers were pitted against soldiers of the Thuril, my wife's people. I became enraged."

"I can understand that," said Miranda. They continued to walk the path upward.

"I used my power to tear apart the imperial arena. I caused the winds to blow, fire to fall from the sky, rain, earthquakes, the whole bag of

tricks. II

and choose to attend a festival for their Emperor."

Miranda said, "I think I understand."

"It was a temper tantrum," said Pug. "Nothing more. I could have found a better way to deal with it had I remained calm, but I let my anger consume me."

"It's understandable," she said.

"It may be understandable," replied Pug, "but it is no more forgivable

for being understandable." He paused at the top of the ridge that separated

the beach from the interior of the island and looked out at the vista. "Look

at the sea. It doesn't care. It endures. This world endures. Shila will eventually

endure. When the last demon starves to death, something will happen.

A bit of life will fall from the sky, in a meteor or on the winds of magic, or by means I don't understand. Maybe it will be a single blade of

grass hidden behind a rock the demons missed, or some other tiny life that lingers at the bottom of the oceans will emerge and eventually that

world will again see life thrive, even if I never return to it."

"What are you saying, my love?"

"It's tempting to think of yourself as powerful when those around you are far less so, but compared to the simple fact of existence, to the power

of life and how it hangs on, we are nothing." He looked at his wife, "The

Gods are nothing." He looked toward their home. "Despite my years, I am nothing more than a child when it comes to understanding these things. I know now why your father was always so driven to seek out

blamed herself for goading him into attacking the demon prematurely and almost losing his life in the process.

"Well', perhaps my injuries taught me something. Had I challenged Jakan when he was still in Krondor, I might not have survived to defeat him at Sethanon."

"Is that why you avoid helping remove this General Fadawah fro'," Ylith?"

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"Patrick would be pleased for me to simply show up and burn the entire province of Yabon to the ground. He'd happily move settlers in from the East and replant trees, claiming a great victory.

"I doubt the people living there would agree, and neither would the elves or the dwarves who live nearby. Besides, most of those men are no

more evil than those serving Patrick. I find matters of politics are of less interest to me every day."

"Wise," said Miranda. "You are a force, as am I, and between the two of us we could probably conquer a small nation."

"Yes," said Pug with a grin, his first smile since telling of the arena.

"What would you do with it?"

"Ask Fadawah, " suggested Miranda. "He obviously has plans."

Entering the main building of the estate Pug said "I h I

...thing more. Dash knew of the existence of the essence of a great evil, the Nameless) One, who was at the root of all the troubles they had

been facing for the previous century. And that evil had human agents, men whom Pug had encountered more than once in the past. Pug kept

his thoughts to himself, but there had been one agent of Nalar, a mad r, magician named Sidi, who had created havoc fifty years before. Pug thought the man dead, but now he wasn't sure. If it wasn't Sidi he sensed

Out there, it was another like him and either possibility left Pug feeling dread and fear. Dealing with these forces was a task beyond any Pug had imagined while he was a Great One of the Assembly, or during his early days of creating Stardock.

It was a task that more than once left Pug feeling defeated before he had even begun. He thanked the gods that he had Miranda, for without her, he would long before have given himself up to despair.

Dash looked up and saw a face he knew. "Talwin?"

The former prisoner walked past the two constables sitting at the table drinking coffee and getting ready for their next patrol. "Can I speak to

you in Private?" asked the man who had vanished right after Dash escaped from Krondor.

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"You need a job as a constable," supplied Dash.

"Yes. When the present danger is over and the city more secure than it is, I'll move back to the palace and get out of your hair. Right now I

need to be a constable."

"Do you report to me?" asked Dash.

"No," said Talwin. "I report to the Duke of Krondor."

"There is no Duke of Krondor," said Dash.

"Not at present, but until there is, I report to Duke Brian."

Dash inclined his head to show that made sense. "Have you alerted him to your existence?"

"Not yet," said Talwin. "The fewer people who know of me, the better. Rumor has it the King is sending Rufio, Earl Delamo, from Rodez

to take the office. If true, I'll let him know who I am as soon as he arrives. "

Dash said, "I'm not happy with having a constable here under false colors, but I know the business. Just make sure if there's anything going

on out there I should know about, you tell me."

"I'll do that," said Talwin.

"Now, what else do you need from me?"

"I need to know who killed your two men."

Suddenly Dash had an insight. "You mean who killed your two agents, don't you?"

Talwin nodded. "How did you guess?"

"The Mockers. Someone told me I needed to find out what Nolan and Riggs did before joining up."

"They spent a lot of time working the docks for your grandfather and

I need to get my network reestablished." He looked pained as he said,
"They ere my last two agents in this city \$I

t
Talwin reached inside his tunic and pulled out a faded parchment
obviously old. Dash read:

I
To whoever reads this..

The bearer of this document will be identified by a mole on his
neck and a scar on the back of his left arm. He is a servant of the
crown and I request all aid and assistance asked be given to him
without question.

Signed,
James, Duke of Krondor

Dash's eyebrows rose. He glanced at Talwin and saw the man pointing
to the mole on his neck, then rolling up his left sleeve to show the
scar on his arm.

"Who are you?" Dash asked quietly.

"I was your grandfather's agent, and your father's after him."

"Agent?" asked Dash. "One of his spies, you mean."

"Among other things," said Talwin.

"And I don't suppose Talwin is your real name," said Dash.

"It serves," said Talwin. Lowering his voice he said, "As Sheriff of
Krondor you need to know that I am responsible for intelligence
within

the Western Realm, now."

Dash nodded. "Knowing my grandfather, he didn't hand out a lot of

Dash is to relieve our enemy agents.

Dash was silent for a moment. "Very well. What is it you need?"

"Cooperation between us. Until the palace staff is restored and I can work out of there unseen, I need to work someplace where I can be seen"

poking around in all parts of the city without people asking too many questions."

"SO You have to start from scratch."

"Yes," said Talwin. "It's the only reason you're being told all this."

Dash said, "I understand. Look, circumstances say we must work together. Someone killed one of my better snitches when I started asking

aboUt who murdered your men."

Q
~Raymond E. Feist

,,Someone in Krondor doesn't want us too close," said Talwin.
anyway, we don't have enough warm bodies to do all the jobs that

need to be done. Sniff around and I won't bother you with a regular beat.

if anyone asks, you're my deputy and on errands for me. I think we'd better quickly get another man in on this."

,,, "0?yy

"Gustaf is as rock-solid as he can be."

"Not my idea of an agent," said Talwin dubiously.

"Not mine, either," admitted Dash, "but we can't an be sneaky bastards.

I want a third person knowing what's going On so if we both end up dead he can run off to Brian Silden and let him know why. I don't

than five hundred men under arms in the entire city, we could all be
dead

before the snows fall next winter."

"I'll take care of the Mockers," said Dash. "You find yourself some
agents. I don't want to know who they are, unless you stick them in
here

as constables.

"Agreed."

"I assume you're using intermediaries."

"Safe assumption."

"Make a list and give it to me. I'll hide it in my room in the
palace."

He grinned. "I actually manage to get back there once a week to
change

clothes and bathe. I'll leave a sealed message with Lord Brian, an
, open

upon my death' message telling where the list is."

Talwin said, "'when the network is reestablished, I'll want the list
destroyed."

oine to

"Gladly," said Dash, "but what good are agents uuL &
do if you and I are both gone and there's no one to get the
information
to the crown?"

"I understand," said Talwin.

"Come with me," said Dash.

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

He took Talwin back to the center of the room. To the two resting
constables, he said, "This is Talwin. He's been appointed the new
Deputy.

"Hot" stallion appeared to be correct, for the black stud snorted and pawed the ground and appeared to be ready to dump his rider at any moment. The Squire didn't attempt to get off until an orderly ran over and took the animal's bridle. Then he dismounted quickly, putting distance between himself and the horse.

Duko laughed. "Why did he pick that fractious creature?"

"Vanity," said Jimmy. "You see a lot of that east of Malac's Cross."

"And what company is that?" asked Duko.

"His own private guard. Many nobles in the East indulge themselves with such companies. They're very pretty on parade." Looking at the company of soldiers that accompanied the Squire, it was obvious it was a unit designed for parade, not combat. Each man sat astride a black horse, nearly identical in size, and all without a marking.

Each soldier wore buckskin-colored leggings tucked into knee-high black cavalier boots, the large knee flaps of which were rimmed in scarlet cord.

The color was an exact match to their red tunics, which were trimmed in black whipcord at shoulders, sleeve, and collar. Their polished steel breastplates

appeared to be trimmed in brass, and each man had a short yellow cape slung over the left shoulder. Atop their heads they endured steel

round helmets, trimmed in white fur, with polished steel neck chains.

Each man carried a long lance of lacquered black wood tipped with brilliantly polished steel.

to take the Duke's proffered hand or bow, so he gave a rapid and awkward bow, and reached out to take the Duke's hand just as it was being withdrawn.

Jimmy almost hurt himself trying,,Ah ... Your Grace," said the flustered squire from Bas-Tyra. "I've come to place my sword at your disposal. He saw Jimmy standing off to one side, and said, "James?"

"Marcel," Jimmy said with a slight bow.

"I didn't know you were here, Squire."

"It's Earl, now, actually," said Duke.

Marcel's eyes widened, which heightened his comic appearance. For while he was dressed exactly like his men, he had elected to wear a larger helm, with stylized wings on each side. He had a round face, with a large waxed mustache that stuck out on either side.

"Congratulations," said Marcel.

Jimmy couldn't resist. "I received the office upon my father's death,"

he said seriously.

Marcel Duval had the decency to blush a furious red color, stammer and appear close to tears over the gaffe. "I'm so sorry ... m'lord," he

said with a tone so apologetic it bordered on the comical.

Jimmy swallowed a laugh and said, "Glad to see you, Marcel."

Duval ignored the remark, totally defeated socially. He turned to Duke and, mustering as military a manner as he could, said, I have fifty

lancers at your disposal, m'lord!"

Duke said, "I'll have my sergeant get your men billeted, Squire. As

A -'II -- the rank of lieutenant. Join

en, harbor is harmless, and a sore," said Jimmy. When he wore

boys in Rillanon, he was always trying to intrude into social situations to

which he had not been invited. I think he was trying to get on Patrick's good side." Jimmy sighed. "It was Patrick who couldn't stand him, actually.

Francie, Dash, and I got along well enough with him."

"Francie?" asked Duko.

Jimmy's expression clouded over, as memory of her suddenly inserted

itself in his consciousness. "The Duke of Silden's daughter," Jimmy supplied.

"

Well, he has fifty men. We'll get them into shape, and if nothing else, they'll be very obvious on patrol, so the Keshians will know they're around."

"They'll be hard to miss in those scarlet tunics," said Jimmy.

A knock came at the door and it opened, and a messenger hurried in.

Handing a packet to Jimmy, he said, "Messages from Land's End, M'lords."

Jimmy took them, opened the packet, and Duko waved the messenger outside. Jimmy quickly sorted out those messages that were urgent and other communiques that could wait, then opened the first. "Damn," he said as he skimmed the letter. The Duke was learning to read the

King's tongue, but it was more efficient to let Jimmy read and sum up for him.

"Another raid and this time two villages south of Land's End were sacked.

castle wide berth, and he's routed two other raids in the area."
Duko walked back to the window and looked out at his rapidly growing town. "I know Kuvak's doing the best he can down there. It's not his fault." He looked at the map. "When will they come?"

"The Keshians?"

"They're not going to do this forever. There's a reason behind the raids and the probes. They will eventually show us what their intent is,

but it may be too late."

Jimmy was silent. While ambassadors were negotiating at Stardock, men from both nations were dying. Jimmy knew that the strike would come if and when the Keshians decided they could strengthen their negotiating position by doing so.

A strike at the Vale of Dreams, an attempt to seize the western coast from Land's End to Port Vykor, or a strike directly at Krondor, all were

Possible. And they were only able to defend two of those three locations, so they had a one in three chance of being wrong, tragically wrong.

And lingering in the back of his mind was that escaped Keshian officer, and what he knew.

"UP here," said Dash.

in struck

Turning and looking up, Trina smiled, and Dash was agitated with how attractive she could be should she ever decide to play up her

looks. "You're getting better, Sheriff Puppy."

Dash leaped down from the roof beam upon which he had rested, landing lightly on his feet. "I found out who Nolan and Riggs worked

the city's security, we thought it a bit of a joke. I guess not.

You're more

like your grandfather than not."

"You knew my grandfather?" asked Dash.

"Only by reputation. Our old friend held your grandfather in awe."

Dash laughed. "I have always understood how special my grandfather was, but I never thought of him that way."

"Think on it, Sheriff Puppy. A thief who became the most powerful noble in the Kingdom. That's a tale."

"I guess," said Dash. "But to me he was always Grandfather, and those stories were always just wonderful stories."

"What do you propose?" asked Trina, changing the topic.

"I need to know if you catch sight of any of these strangers in the sewer, especially if you discover where they're hiding."

Trina said, "You know who they are?"

"I have my suspicions," said Dash.

"Care to share them?"

"Would you in my place?"

She laughed. "No, I wouldn't. What is in it for the Mockers?"

Dash said, "I should think you'd just want them gone if they're causing you problems."

"They are causing us no problems whatsoever. Nolan and Riggs We knew because they've bought information from us before, and they've set

UP a few deals. We always suspected they were working for some businessmen

in the city, like Avery and his bunch, who didn't wish to conduct business in the usual fashion, or a noble who wasn't entirely aboveboard

in paying taxes. That sort of thing."

Dash realized she was fishing for information. "Whoever Nolan and Riggs were working for prior to the war, they were my men when they

security or look the other way about a capital crime. I'll get what I want

without your help."

"I'll ask him," said Trina. She started to leave.

"Trina," said Dash.

She stopped and smiled. "You want something else?"

Dash ignored the double entendre. "How is he?"

Trina lost her smile. "Not well."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Her smile returned, this time a small one without any hint of

mockery.

"No, I don't think so, but it's good of you to ask."

Dash said, "Well, he is family."

Trina was silent for a long minute, then she reached out and touched

Dash's cheek. "Yes, more than I thought." Then, with a sudden turn,

she

was out the door and down the street into the darkness.

Dash waited a few minutes, then ducked out the back of the old

building.

He felt an odd sensation inside. He didn't know how much of it was

concern for the old man's health, worry over the possible

infiltration of

Keshian agents into the city, or the woman's touch on his cheek.

Muttering

to himself, Dash said, "If only she wasn't so damned attractive."

Putting aside the distractions of a beautiful woman, he turned his

mind back to the problems of protecting the city of Krondor.

Twenty

SHOUTED.

Erik motioned the third element of the infantry forward and they

The summer was nearly half over, with the Festival of Banapis only a week away. If there were heavy fall rains, or an early winter snow, they could lose Yabon Province for good. And if they lost Yabon this year, it was possible they would lose Krondor again the next. If not sooner.

Erik could not escape the feeling that Krondor lay naked and ready for the taking if Kesh should simply realize that fact. He hoped the negotiations at Stardock were proceeding well. He pushed aside his worry and looked at Owen. The Knight-Marshal of Krondor nodded, and Erik spurred his own horse forward. For whatever reasons, Owen had ordered Erik to remain behind at the headquarters

tent, rather than lead the first assault as was Erik's desire. The fighting was fierce for an hour, then suddenly the defense collapsed.

Erik moved his horse through the gate and realized that, once again, they were facing an enemy that lacked the resources for a sustained

defense.

Erik rode around, and saw that everything was now under control.

As before, he dispatched light cavalry to ride up the road, seeking those fleeing northward, preventing any from reaching their own lines. Greylock appeared at the gate of the barricade, and Erik rode toward bin,. "This is pointless," he said. "If what Subai says is true, we should

be flattered."

Owen returned the smile, then seemed to leap out of his saddle, backward, spinning over the rear of his horse and landing hard on his back. His horse sprang forward.

Erik looked in all directions, and all he could see were mercenaries throwing down their swords, putting their hands in the air, and being herded to rear positions. A few signs of struggle could still be seen, and there was sporadic combat in the distance, but whoever shot the crossbow bolt that had felled Greylock was nowhere to be seen.

"Damn!" Erik leaped from his horse, and raced to where Greylock lay. Before Erik's knee touched the ground next to his old friend, he knew

the dreadful truth. A crossbow bolt protruded from above the breastplate Owen wore, and it had smashed the upper portion of his chest and lower throat to pulp. Blood flowed everywhere and Owen's eyes stared lifelessly at the sky above.

Erik felt a cold stab of anger and hopelessness. He felt like screaming, but resisted the impulse. Owen had always been a friend, even before Erik

had become a soldier, and they had shared a love for horses, an appreciation* n of the great wines from the Darkmoor region, and the fruits of honest labor. Looking down at the lifeless form of his old friend, Erik's

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them. One of them looked as if he was ready to vomit. Perspiration appeared

on his brow as he said, "Captain ... I was. .

"What?" demanded Erik.

The man appeared close to tears as he said, "I was about to shoot when the order to hold was called out. I put the crossbow over my shoulder

, and it went off."

"It's true!" said the other man. "He fired it backward. It was an accident."

Erik closed his eyes. He felt a shaking in his body start at his feet and

run up his legs to his groin and up through his chest. Of all the jokes he

had endured in his short life, this was the most cruel. Owen had died at

the hands of one of his own men, by accident, because the man had been

lazy and sloppy.

With a hard swallow, Erik forced back his frustration and rage, He knew there were other officers in the army who would hang this man for

not unloading his crossbow and costing the Kingdom the life of their

more than to Owen and slipped him up in his arms, as if carrying a child, and turned toward the gates. The battle was not quite over, but the situation was well in hand, and Erik felt a need, a duty, to carry his old friend back to his command pavilion; he would not trust the task to another. Slowly, he walked back down the road, holding his dear friend.

The officers had assembled and the silence was awkward. Erik stood beside Owen's empty chair of command. He glanced around the room. There were a dozen captains senior to him, but none holding the unique position of Captain of the Prince's Crimson Eagles. The nobility in the tent was also senior to him, but none of them were part of Patrick's command structure.

Erik self-consciously cleared his throat, then said, "My lords, we are faced with a dilemma. The Knight-Marshal has fallen and we are in need of a commander. Until Prince Patrick appoints one, we need to be United in our duty." He looked around the tent. Many eyes regarded him suspiciously. "

If Captain Subai were here, I would easily accept him 0 years of service to the Principality. Or if Captain Calis my predecessor, were here, he also would easily ascend to the office of leader, given his commander. But we have a situation both dangerous and awkward." Erik looked at one old soldier the E I f M Lord Richard. "

"Let

us get the Knight-Marshal on his way back to Krondor, then I want a meeting of all senior staff immediately after."

Erik von Darkmoor saluted and said, "Sir," and left the tent before anyone could say another word. He hurried in search of Jadow Shati, for

he needed to make sure his own men knew what they must do before any

other officer could find them and send them off on another mission.

He

might give public acknowledgment to the new commander, but he wasn't about to turn his own men over to the whim of a man who a year before

had been hosting parties at his peaceful seaside estate a half-continent away.

I uil V arui-iic, ana said, "IV,

Save those soldiers guarding prisoners, the entirety of the Kingdom's Army of the West stood at attention as the wagon carrying Greylock's

body rolled south. Men who barely knew the Knight-Marshal of Krondor stood side by side with men who had served every step of the way with Owen.

Despite the previous day's victory, there was a grim mood in camp,

as if everyone sensed that the easy victories were behind them now, and

that the future held only more loss and suffering.

Drummers beat a slow tattoo and a single horn blew farewell, and as

old
chair.
Earl Richard was an old man, grey hair and blue eyes his dominant features. His long face seemed worn by years of duty, but his voice was strong and without hesitation when he spoke. "I am appointing Captain von Darkmoor my second-in-command, gentleman, to keep as much continuity as possible. For that reason, I'm asking all of you to return to your previous assignments, and to funnel all communications through Captain

von Darkmoor. I will instruct my son, Lelan, to assume command of our cavalry units from Makurlic. That will be all."

The nobles and other officers departed, and Richard said, "Erik, stay a moment."

"Sir?" asked Erik when they were alone.

"I know why you chose me, son," said the old officer. "You've a fair grasp of politics. I appreciate that. What I don't appreciate is any thought

you might have of using me for your own gains."

Erik stiffened. "Sir, I will follow your orders and offer you the best counsel of which I am capable. Should you find my service lacking, you may remove me at your pleasure and I will not voice objection, even to the Prince. "

"Well said," replied the Earl, "but now I need to know your heart. I've seen you lead men in the field, von Darkmoor, and the reports of your actions last year at Nightmare Ridge do you credit, but I need to know I can depend on you."

"My lord," said Erik, "I have no ambitions in this. I am a reluctant

Richard's messages are short, snip, and I suggest you read them.
Erik pointed to the map on the table before Earl Richard. "We're

here,
and about here"-his finger jumped up the map about sixty miles-"we
should hit the first serious defensive position. If what Subai writes
is accurate
, it's going to be hell to pay getting to Ylith."

(~I assume you've considered all the alternatives, landing on Free
Cities soil and attacking from the west, attempting to land outside
the
harbor, and the rest?"

Erik nodded. just in

something you and Owen missed, but I'm certain

case"II'Ilmiwghatntthyionuk toof scover those discarded options for
me later,

you didn't miss anything. Assuming that's true, what do we do next?"

Erik said, "I want to take a patrol and go north, and see how far I
can get before things get nasty. I want to see what Subai saw, my
lord."

Richard, Earl of Makurlic, said nothing for a long moment, his mind
weighing options, then he said, "I sent a letter to Prince Patrick,
asking

him to relieve me of this command, but until he does, I suppose I
should

act like a commander.

"Here's what you do. Send those Hadati hillmen ahead up the right
flank. They can move through the hills better than anyone we have.

Have
them leave at once, Then send a company of your Crimson Eagles up the
left flank, along the coast but out of sight.

"Then at first light tomorrow, I want you and my son to lead a patrol

was off.

Talwin signaled from outside the building and Dash waved a reply through the open front door. He then motioned with his hand indicating Talwin and the men next to him should circle around the next block of buildings and come up behind the men they stalked. Their targets, four men who had been waiting for a fifth for the last half hour, were gathered together in a workyard behind an abandoned shop in the poor quarter. Talwin vanished into the night with his men. It had taken Dash, with the help of the Mockers, a week to discover this meeting place. Talwin had identified three men who were very likely to be Keshian agents, and the fourth was either another agent or their employee. Dash had overheard enough snippets of conversation to know they were getting restless waiting for someone and would soon leave if that Person didn't show up.

Dash wanted Talwin and the two constables with him ready to come from the other side of the yard, through a broken-down fence next to the alley. Dash and his men were in an old shop, hiding by hanging above

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the main floor in the rafters. A glance into the murk of the shop's ceiling showed his three men crouched uncomfortably on the roof beam. He'd

and pulled a sword and dagger to his side.

"Who?" asked the first man.

"Who do you think?" offered the first man. "The Prince's men."

"They'd have to be quicker than they've been so far," came the voice of a man ducking into view from the next building. "You almost got nicked," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked the first man.

"I saw constables hurrying away from just in front of this building.

They looked like they was looking through the door. They must have

just

missed you all."

Dash decided it was time. He pulled his sword and ran from his hiding

place, his three constables behind him. The first man turned and

fled,

running right into Talwin as he climbed through a large hole in the

fence.

"Put down your weapons!" Dash commanded.

Four of the men put down weapons, but the one slender man, the one

Dash had judged dangerous, pulled his. "Run!" he shouted to his

companions,

and as if to buy them time, he launched a two-weapon attack on

Dash.

Dash had practiced against this style of fighting before, but this

man

was very good at it. One of his constables tried to come to his aid

but

only managed to almost get Dash killed. "Back off." Dash commanded

after he slipped aside of a thrust, while his constable moved away.

Talwin walked up behind the slender man and slammed him in the

back of the head with the hilt of his sword. Dash, frustrated at the

long

...I know you! You're a clerk from the palace!" The man said nothing,

looking terrified.

Talwin said, "Let's get this bunch to the palace for some questioning

...
if you agree, Sheriff"

"Good idea, Deputy," said Dash.

The other members of the constabulary knew something odd was going on with Talwin, but no one had voiced any concerns, or at least not within Dash's hearing. Dash, Talwin, and the other five constables ordered two of the prisoners to pick up their unconscious comrade and started them on their way to the palace.

"They're not Keshian," said Talwin as he closed the door behind them.

"Then who are they working for?" asked Dash.

They were in Dash's room, unused since he had been given the office of Sheriff. "I think they're working for the Keshians, but they may not know that."

Dash had appropriated five rooms in the palace in which each of the prisoners was isolated. He didn't want them talking to one another before

questioning each in turn. Talwin had briefly spoken to each man, before

beginning intensive questioning. He said, "We've got one interesting case,

Pickney, a clerk from the Prince's office. The rest of them are ... odd.

One vagabond swordsman, one baker, a stablehand, and a journeyman mason."

Dash said, "Hardly the lot I'd pick for conspiracy."

who knows his way around the back alleys and sewers. He may be part
Of those who are causing some troubles in the Poor Quarter."
Talwin nodded. "Well, let me squeeze them and see what I can find
out.))

Dash said, "Good. I think I'm going to sleep in my own bed tonight.
It's been a month.

Talwin said, "By the way, I should be leaving your service the end
of the week."

"oh?" said Dash, with a slight smile. "Have I been that difficult an
employer?"

' (Duke Ruflo arrives.

it's been confirmed he's to be Duke of Krondor?"

"Not publicly," said Talwin. ,you didn't hear that from me."

Dash waved away the man, who closed the door while Dash took off
his boots. He lay back on his own bed and marveled at how soft his
heavy

down mattress was compared to that straw thing in the back of the
jail.

He was wondering if he should take this one back with him when he
fell asleep.

He came awake suddenly when someone pounded on his door.

"What?" he said sleepily, opening his door.

Talwin said, "We need to talk."

Dash waved him inside. "How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours."

"It wasn't long enough," said Dash.

"We have a grave problem."

"What?" asked Dash, coming awake.

"Those five are dupes, as I suspected, but they were working for
someone

...s working for a band of smugglers from Darbin.

"Cut to it, what's going on?"

"These five, and others I'll warrant, were gathering information on the deployment of resources, soldiers, the condition of defenses, every

potentially valuable bit of information an enemy might want. They were

feeding it to someone here in the palace." the

"Now I'm confused. I could see someone in the palace feeding information to someone outside, but from outside in?"

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

"That's what had me puzzled for a bit, but the fact is, the person inside the castle they were reporting to wasn't part of Patrick's staff"

"Who was it?"

Talwin said, "A man who was working here when Patrick arrived, but who stayed on when Duko left. A man who seemed to be everywhere when someone needed help with documents or messages. A man named Malar Enares."

Dash said, "Gods! He's that servant we met out in the woods last winter. He claimed to be from the vale."

Talwin shook his head. "If we had access to your grandfather's documents,

I bet we'd find his name amongst those on a list of agents of Great Kesh."

Suddenly Dash was concerned about his brother. "I need to see if there are any messages in from Duko down at Port Vykor in the last few days. '

"Enares left with your brother, right?"

yet.
Your grandfather had a marvelously devious mind and created a thing
of
beauty. It may take me the rest of my life, but eventually I'll get
the
intelligence network he made back in place."
"Well, as long as I'm the Sheriff of Krondor, if you need help, let
me
know.)?"

"I will," said Talwin, following Dash through the door.
Talwin turned without another word and moved back toward the
rooms in which the prisoners were kept, while Dash hurried toward the
Knight-Marshal's office, where all incoming military messages would
be
logged before being sent to Prince Patrick, or north to Lord
Greylock. If
Jimmy had sent word, it would be there. Dash picked up the pace and
was almost running when he reached the door.
The sleepy-looking clerk looked up and said, "Yes, Sheriff.>"
"has there been a message from Port Vykor in the last day or two?"

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Raymond E. Feist

wait on worrying about his brother.

"Sheriff PUPPY," came the voice through the window
Dash came awake. He had spent a long day keeping the city under

control and had retired to the little room in the rear of the old inn
he used
for sleeping.

'Trina?" he asked as he stood up to look through the shutters.

Opening
them, he saw the young woman's face illuminated by moonlight.
Grinning, he stood there in his under-trousers. His shirt, trousers,
and

boots lay in a heap beside his straw mattress. "Why do I doubt you
came

to my window because you couldn't bear to be away from me?"

She smiled back and took a moment to look him up and down, then

'You're a pretty enough boy, Sheriff Puppy, but I like my men with
a little more experience."

Dash started getting dressed. "I feel like I've got enough experience
for a man three times my age," he said. "As much as I enjoy bantering
with you, why did you wake me?"

'We've got a problem."

Dash grabbed his sword, handed it to Trina, then with a single vault,
grabbed the upper sill of the window and hauled himself through.

Landing

on the ground next to her, he said, "We as in 'you and me,' or as in
'the

Mockers'?" as he took back his sword and buckled it around his waist.

"As in the entire city of Krondor," she replied. Suddenly, and

apparently

impulsively, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. 'I wasn't

...man's shirt as a match.

Dash grinned. "Have I ever told you about my grandfather?"

She shook her head in irritation. "We don't have time for this."

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

,,What's the problem?"

,,We've found that bunch who've been using the sewers, and who probably killed your men."

',Where?'

"Near that point where Kirby was found, over by Five Points. There's a big tannery that was burned to the ground during the battle, but it's got

a subbasement, a big one, and a long water entrance to the bay, as well

as the usual sewer dumps."

,,I want to see this."

"I thought you would." He started walking away when Trina said,

"Dash?"

He stopped and turned around. "What?"

I The Old Man."

"How is he?"

She shook her head slightly. "Not much longer."

"Damn," said Dash, and he surprised himself at how sad knowing that his grandfather's brother was dying made him. "Where is he?"

"Someplace safe. He won't see you."

44I^Y?~p

"He won't see anybody but me and one or two others."

Dash paused, then said, "Who's going to take over?"

The girl grinned. "I would tell the Sheriff"

Seriously, Dash said, "You will if you get into enough trouble."

"I'll think on this," said Trina.

They hurried through the night, and when they reached the abandoned

c"y. In summer, with the gate destroyed, only a little water ran through the very center of the manmade stream. Trina jumped over it nimbly and Dash followed her, marveling at just how lithe she was. She wore her ill,al man's shirt and black leather vest, tight leggings and high boots. Dash could see she was both strong and fast.

She headed straight toward a large open pipe in the far bank. It was 'Id, Sre-hardened clay, circled by a heavy iron band. Pieces of the clay had fallen away over the years, where the pipe extended from the bank,

- uirce-toot length of metal could be seen at the upper lip of the pipe.

With a prodigious leap, she vaulted to where she could grip the bar and swung herself into the pipe, vanishing from view.

Dash waited a moment to let her get clear, then duplicated her leap. He discovered why as he swung over broken crockery, glass, and jagged metal. Landing behind Trina, he said, "Not the normal garbage one expects. "

"
It discourages the idly curious."

She moved on without another word, and Dash followed her. They moved deeper into the sewer network, the woman leading the way surely, though there was almost no light filtering down through the burned-out buildings above. At the first turn right, she turned and stopped,

the large pipes enclosing a shaft, with two smaller enough big
enough for a person to crab-walk through-emptying into the large
circular

cavern, This was Five Points. Trina pointed at the upper left of the
two smaller pipes. As he poised to jump, she whispered, "Trip wire."
Dash pulled himself up and moved slowly and quietly in the dark,
feeling around before him in case there might have been any
additional

alarms added. Trina would have warned him had there been one she knew
about, but Dash's grandfather had impressed on him that people who
took

things for granted in these situations were called corpses.
As he inched along, he found himself thinking of Trina. He had
known many women since the age of fifteen, being handsome, noble, and
the grandson of the most powerful man after the King in the nation.

Twice
he had been infatuated to the point of thinking he might be in love,
but

both times the notion had quickly passed. But something about this
woman thief, with her mannish clothing, unkempt hair, and piercing
stare

caught his imagination. It had been quite some time since he had
known"

a woman and that was part of it, but there was something more, and he
wondered if circumstances would ever permit more than a
casualflirtation

.
Dash froze. He was alone in the dark looking for traps, and he was
daydreaming about a woman. He scolded himself and heard his grand'
father's voice in his mind. The old man would have had a great deal

say about this sort Of inattention.

Dash took a deep breath and began Moving again. After a few minutes

with this line across the duct. When silence continued unbroken for a long while, he moved his hand back, waiting again.

He touched it again, as gently as possible, and ran his finger to the right. He encountered a metal eye, driven into the side of the duct, and

there the line was tied. He moved his finger to the left and found another eyelet, but this time the line was threaded through and ran forward in the direction he was heading.

He felt over and under the line to make sure there wasn't a second and when he was satisfied this was the only line across the way, he moved

back. With little squirming, he got on his back and crawled under the line. When he was past the line, he again got up into his kneeling position and continued his careful progress.

Soon he saw a dim light ahead and he worked toward it. Again he heard voices and again the conversation was just below his ability to hear it. He moved slowly forward.

He reached a large catch basin, with a big grating overhead, and above him he could hear boots on the stone. From the stench at this end of the Pipe, it was obvious the men had been using the catch basin to relieve themselves and didn't have enough water to flush the pipe easily.

Dash moved around and craned his neck. He could see movement, and a pair of boots. Much of his view was cut off by a chair, near the catch basin grate, and the man who sat on it. cow, horse, what does it matter?"

"You just want some because you didn't bring anything to eat." i didn't know we'd be spending our lives waiting here."

'Maybe the others ran into some trouble?"

"Could be, but orders are clear enough. Wait here."

"Did you at least bring some cards?"

Dash settled in.

Near dawn, Dash lowered himself out of the large pipe at Five Points. found himself disappointed that Trina wasn't waiting. He knew she'd probably left a moment after he entered the pipe, but he still wished she

had lingered. He found that feeling irrational alongside the distress he was experiencing over what he had found.

Not wishing to stay too long, he hurried through the pipes and back toward the New Market Jail. He knew that as soon as he got there, he was going to have to change clothing, then hurry to the palace. This wasn't a matter for the Sheriff and his constables, but Brian Silden and the army.

Dash forced himself to calmness, but if what he had overheard was any indication, someone was readying a staging area. Inside the city itself, a nest of soldiers was being prepared, soldiers who would appear within

house, watching workers repair the walls and floor above. "What won't do, Nakor?" he asked.

Nakor looked up, surprised at being addressed. "What? What won't do?"

Roo laughed. "You were the one muttering that something wouldn't do!"

"Was I?" asked Nakor, looking surprised. "How odd."

Roo shook his head in amusement. "You, odd? Perish the thought."

Nakor said, "Never mind. I need something."

"What?" asked Roo.

"I need to get a message to someone."

"Who?"

'Pug.~

Roo motioned Nakor away from the workers and said, "I think you need to start at the beginning."

"I had a dream last night," said Nakor. "I don't have many of them, so when I do, I try to pay attention."

"All right," said Roo. "I'm with you so far."

Nakor grinned. "I don't think so. But that's all right. There's something

going on. There are three pieces here, all seemingly separate, but they're all the same thing. And they all look to be about one thing, but

they're about another. And after the odd thing that happened, I need to

talk to Pug. ~ ~

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"That's all right," said Nakor, squeezing Roo's upper arm in a

reassuring

fashion. "Anyway, do you know where Pug is?"

"No, but I can ask at the palace. Someone there might.) Don't you have some sort of magic ... trick you can do that would get Pug's attention?"

"

Maybe, but I don't know if the damage would be worth it."

"I don't want to know," said Roo.

"No, you don't," agreed Nakor. He looked around, as if noticing the work for the first time. "What is this, then?"

"No one's seen the old owner since the fall of the city, so either he's

dead or not coming back. Even if he shows up, we'll work out a deal."

Roo waved his hand around in an arc. "I'm trying to restore this exactly

as it was before the war. I'm very fond of this place."

"As you should be," said Nakor with a grin. "You made a great deal of wealth here."

Roo shrugged. "That's part of it, but more importantly, this is where I made myself."

You've come a long way, said Nakor.

"More than I could have imagined," said the one-time death cell prisoner.

'How is your wife?" motioning with his hands as he grinned.

"Getting large," he said,

"I heard a rumor that you arrived in town with Lord Vasarius of Queg as a prisoner."

Roo said, "He wasn't my prisoner."

,,is it a good story?"

Roo said, "It's a very good story."

"Good, then you can tell me sometime, but first I need to ask about

before
the fighting. As war hadn't formally been declared, trade between the
Kingdom and Kesh was resuming. If the Wreckers Guild could coiltil"e

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

ring
als. ships, the harbor would be navigable the following spring, and
fully
restored within a year after that.

Moving through the crowd, Nakor said, "This city is like a person,
don't you see?"

"It was beat up pretty badly," agreed Roo, "but it's coming back."

"More," said Nakor. "There are cities that have no ... I don't know
what to call it, an identity perhaps. A sense of being someplace
different.

Lots of those in the Empire. Very old cities with lots of history,
but one

day is much like the next. Krondor is a very lively place in
comparison."

Roo laughed. "In a manner of speaking."

They reached the market and saw the New Market Jail, now sporting
a fresh coat of paint and bars on all the visible windows. Entering
the

door, they found a harried-looking clerk, who looked up and said,

"Yes?"

"We're looking for the Sheriff," said Nakor.

"He's out in the market, somewhere, and will be back here, sometime.

Sorry," he said, returning to his paperwork.

Roo motioned for Nakor to move outside. They stood on the porch
looking at the press of people in the market. Vendors had organized
themselves

"What?"

"I know you, my friend, and if you think you're helping out by starting a riot so that every constable in the market comes running, think again. II

"Well, it would be effective, wouldn't it?"

"Do you remember an old proverb?"

"Several. Which one do you have in mind?"

"The one about not using an ax to remove a fly from a friend's nose."

Nakor's grin broadened, and he laughed. "I like that one."

"Anyway, the point is, we should be able to find Dash without starting a riot. ~ P

"Very well," said Nakor. "Lead on."

Roo and Nakor entered the press of humanity in the market. Roo knew that Krondor still had less than half its former population, yet it

seemed even more crowded than before, mostly due to the largest portion

of that population thronging to the market. While work was underway throughout the city, in every neighborhood, the business of daily life was

confined for the most part to the market.

Roo and Nakor made their way past wagon . after wagon with late spring and early summer harvest: squash, corn, grain in sacks, and even

some rice up from above Land's End. Fruit was offered and so was wine and ale. A number of prepared food vendors filled the air with aromas pungent. Nakor sneezed as they passed one vendor of

board was set atop them to

serve as a bar. Two dozen men idly stood around, drinking and laughing.

As Nakor and Roo drew near, they quieted down and watched the two men pass.

After they had moved down the street, Nakor said, "That's odd."

"What is,

He motioned over his shoulder. "Those men."

,"What about them?"

Nakor stopped and said, "Turn around and tell me what you see."

Roo did as he was asked, and said, "I see a bunch of workmen drinking

Nakor said, "Look closer."

Roo said, "I don't see. . ."

'What?' Roo scratched his chin.

There's something strange, but I can't quite tell what it is."

Nakor said, "Come with me," and led Roo off the way they had been heading. "First of all, those aren't workers."

"What do you mean?"

"They're dressed like workers, but they're not. They're soldiers."

"Soldiers?" said Roo. "I don't understand."

"You have more work than you have workers, correct?"

"Yes," said Roo. "That's true."

"~g ale?"

I. "Roo stopped. After a moment, he said, "Damn. I thought they were simply having their midday meal."

"That's the second thing, the midday meal isn't for another hour, Roo.

And did you see how they stopped talking when we got too close? And how everyone around them gives them a wide berth?"

Roo said, "Yes, now that you point it out. So the question is, what

what
can I do for you?"
Nakor said, "Tell your great-grandfather I need to talk to him. But before that, there are men at a wagon bar over there"-he pointed to the general area where they had passed the wagon-"dressed like workmen, but they aren't."

Dash nodded. "I know. They are one of several bands like that throughout the market."

"oh?" said Roo. "You know?"

Dash said, "What sort of sheriff would I be if I didn't?"

"The usual sort," said Nakor. "Anyway, if you know about those men, we can talk about Pug."

"What about him?"

"I need to see him."

Dash's eyes narrowed. "And you want me to do what?"

"You're his great-grandson, how do you contact him?"

Dash shook his head. "I don't. If Father had means, he never told me. Or Jimmy, else I'd know. Grandmother merely had to close her eyes. ~)

Nakor nodded. "I know that. Gamina could talk to him across the world at times."

Dash said, "I thought you'd have the means."

Nakor said, "I don't see him that much, except when we're both on

the island. Maybe he is there." Nakor turned toward Roo. "Can I borrow

a ship to go to Sorcerer's Island?

Roo said, "If you haven't noticed, there's a full-blown war going on out there!" He pointed toward the ocean. "A Free Cities ship)might sail

out there without being accosted, but a Kingdom ship is either going to

"You have to see this," said Nakor, setting Off without bothering to see who was following.

Roo looked at Dash, who said, "We'd better see what this is all about."

They hurried after Nakor, so as not to lose sight of him, and the little man walked briskly through the city, all the way to the eastern gate, the

one which opened on the King's Highway. Roo was almost out of breath. By the time they got to this destination,

"We should have ridden."

"I don't have a horse," said Nakor. "I had a horse once, a beautiful black stallion, but he died. That's when I was Nakor the Blue Rider."

Dash said, "What did you want to show us?"

"That," said Nakor, pointing to the statue he had erected a week earlier.

A dozen people were gathered before the statue looking and gesturing.

Dash and Roo left the road and moved to where they could see what the travelers were looking at. Roo asked, "What is that?"

Down the face of the statue, two red streaks could be seen below the eyes, marring the otherwise perfect face.

Dash pushed his way Past the onlookers, and said, "It looks like blood!"

"It is," said Nakor. "The statue of the Lady is crying blood."

Roo hurried over and said, "It's a trick, right?"

"No!" said Nakor. "I wouldn't stoop to cheap tricks at least 'not

where the Lady is concerned. She's the Goddess of Good, and Well, I just wouldn't."

"All right," said Dash. "I'll take your word for that, but what's causing

couldn't he have two marvels across the street from one another?"

Dash said, "I have no idea."

They reached the empty lot between the Temples of Lims-Kragma and Guis-wa. Clerics from several other temples were gathered nearby, peering at the crowd gathered before a tent that was erected there.

Where Nakor had found the tent, Dash had no idea. One day it wasn't there, the next day it was—a huge pavilion with enough room under it to comfortably accommodate a couple of hundred people.

Dash firmly shoved his way through the crowd. Some people began to object until they saw the red armband. When they got to the entrance,

Nakor and Roo a step behind, Dash stopped, and his mouth fell open.

"Gods," said Roo.

Directly before them, his back toward them, in a meditative position, sat Sho Pi and a half dozen other acolytes of this new temple. In the center of the tent was the young woman, Aleta. Only she was neither standing nor sitting. She was in a position identical to Sho Pi's:

legs crossed, hands in her lap. And she was bathed in a nimbus of pure white light which seemed to emanate from within her, suffusing the tent with light. But she floated six feet above the ground.

Roo put his hand on Nakor's shoulder, and said, "I'll give you a ship,))

Dash whispered, "Why my great-grandfather? Why not ask the other temple clerics?"

"Because of that," said Nakor.

Directly below the woman something hovered. Dash and Roo hadn't noticed it when they first entered, because of the startling sight of the

the eyes. He massaged them.

Roo grabbed Nakor by the arm. "I'll take you out to Fishtown myself, right now. I'll put you aboard a ship and you just tell the Captain where

you want to go. I ~

"Thank you." To Sho Pi, Nakor shouted, "Take care of things. And tell Dominic he's in charge until I get back."

If Sho Pi heard Nakor, he said nothing. As they left the tent, Roo said, "I didn't think you went anywhere without Sho Pi going with you.)I

Nakor gave a slight shrug. "That used to be true. But I am no longer his master."

Roo dodged along the street. "When did that happen?"

Using his walking stick to point over his shoulder, Nakor said, "When she started floating in the air a couple of hours ago."

"I see," said Roo.

"And that's what I meant."

"What is what you meant?"

"When you asked me what was I talking about."

Roo said, "When? I seem to be asking you what are you talking about nearly every time we meet."

"When I first walked into the coffeehouse, and I said, 'This won't do,' that's what I was talking about. That blackness."

Roo said, "I don't know what it is, and I don't think I want to know what it is, but 'it won't do' is a rather mild way of putting things.

Just

looking at it scares me."

"We'll fix it," said Nakor. "As soon as I reach Pug."

They got to the docks and Roo only had to wait a few minutes to commandeer one of his boats. He had them row Nakor out to one of his

fastest ships.

"What do you do if Pug's not on the island?"

Nakor said, "Don't worry. Gathis will find him for me. Someone on

"Aye, sir, we do."

"Then you have your orders, Captain."

"Aye, sir," said the Captain. He shouted, "Get ready to cast off.

Secure the cargo!"

Men started scrambling, and Roo instructed the boat crew to turn around and take him back to shore. As he reached the docks he saw the sails unfurling on his ship and he bid Nakor a fair voyage. With good winds he'd reach Sorcerer's Island in a week or less, and knowing Nakor's

,,tricks," he was certain Nakor would see good winds on this voyage.

Reaching the docks, Roo couldn't shake the feeling that whatever was occurring in Krondor, it was now something far beyond his plans for wealth and power. The game that was about to unfold would be beyond the powers of even the richest man in the Western Realm, and that frightened

him. He decided to let the workers leave early tonight and return to his estates. Karli was overseeing the rebuilding there, and Roo had a powerful

desire to spend the night with his wife and children.

Jimmy reviewed the reports until his eyes couldn't focus. He stood up and said, "I have to get some air."

Duko looked up and said, "I understand. You've been reading since dawn." Duko's own command of the written King's Tongue was improving, so he could-now read along with Jimmy or someone else reading aloud, but the messages they were getting were too critical for him to trust

he wasn't making a mistake.

The net effect of this was twofold: first, Jimmy didn't think he could

see anything more than two feet away right now and, second, he was starting to develop an overall appreciation of the strategic situation along

Messages from Shamata:

Duko said, "More messages. You'd better read them."

"The messenger was in a hurry. I didn't have time to read them."

Package.

& "Alj, a" jiii yaae unwrappe tie

He read the single paper that was in the Packet and said, "Gods! One

of our patrols caught sight of a fast-moving Keshian column moving

rapidly

northeast through Tahupset Pass."

What sense is there

"Damned if I know," said jimmy. He motioned for one of the orderlies

in the room to bring over a particular map and spread it out before

the Duke. "That's a pass that runs along the western shore of the Sea

of

Dreams. it's part of the old caravan route from Shamata to Landreth."

'Why would the Keshians threaten Landreth, when we have a garrison

in Shamata that can take them from behind?"

Jimmy stared into space and for a moment he didn't answer, then he

said, "Because they're not going to Landreth. They just want us to

think

they are.'

'Where are they going.

jimmy studied the map. and he said

"They're too far east to support any move at

Land's End." His finger traced a line, if they cut west here,

they could come straight at us, but we're too well defended with all

the

support units for Land's End here."

, 'Unless they want to draw us off before they push at Land's End?"

jimmy rubbed his tired eyes. "Maybe."

Duko said, "Isolating us from Land's End would make sense."

,, if they could, but they'd need more than a single cavalry column.

maybe if they were sneaking other units through. jimmy said, "I

foOthills.
It's part of an old caravan route from the dwarven mines at Dworglrl
that runs to here." His finger stabbed at the map.
"Kronдор?"
ti ~ th i ificance? askeu Li
"Yes," said Jimmy. what if they've been slipping columns and
soldiers
through there for weeks? We just caught a glimpse
of this one." he
reexamined the communique. "No word of banners or markings. The
soldiers could be from anywhere within the Empire."

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CRO"T

"They hold us static with units we're used to facing, then bring up
units from farther down in the Empire. . . "
"And they take Kronдор in a flash attack."
Duko was on his feet. He headed to the door of the headquarters and
was shouting orders just as the old soldier, Matak, got the door
open.
"I want every unit ready to move in an hour!" He turned to Jimmy.
,,My orders instruct me to defend and protect the Southern Marches.
So
I'm keeping the garrison intact, but if you're correct, the Prince
will need
every soldier we can spare back in Kronдор."
With efficiency born of experience, he had the entire garrison moving
within minutes. "Jimmy, you will lead the column, and I hope you're
in
time. For if you are correct, Kesh will strike at Kronдор any time
now,
and if they take it . . ."
Jimmy knew probably better than Duko what that would mean. It

Jimmy said, "I'll have them on the road within the hour."
Duko said, "Good, for if Krondor falls, the West is indeed lost."
If that observation from one of the men attempting to overthrow the
West just a year prior struck Jimmy as ironic, he was too busy to
register
it. He hurried back inside the headquarters and shouted to the
nearest
orderly, "Get all my things together, and get my horse out of the
stable!"

He grabbed a parchment and leaned over the writing desk. He almost
Pushed the scribe out of his seat.
Jimmy couldn't very well order the Knight-Marshal of Krondor to do
anything, nor could Lord Duko, but he could make a suggestion. A
strongly worded suggestion.
He wrote:

Reports indicate a strong likelihood of a major offensive against
Krondor by Kesh, striking along old Dorgin mine road. Urge you
detach whatever units can be spared and send them south by fastest
means.

James, Earl of Vencar.

Raymond E. Feist

He grabbed a stick of sealing wax, heated it, and affixed his ring
seal
to it. He folded the parchment and inserted it into a message pouch.
The scribe whom he had displaced was sitting in his chair, watching
the entire thing. Jimmy turned and said, "What's your name?"
"Herbert, sir. Herbert of Rutherwood."
"Come with me."

"Orders!" shouted Jimmy. "Take this man north."

The scribe stood on the plank behind Jimmy. Jimmy reached around and grabbed him by the front of his tunic, hauling him forward and depositing him on the deck. Jimmy said, "Herbert, take this pouch. Sail north, find our army, and give this to Lord Greylock or Captain von Darkmoor. Do you understand?"

The scribe's eyes were round and he couldn't speak, but he nodded. "Captain, get this man to Lord Greylock. He's somewhere south of Quester's View!"

"Sir!" replied the Captain, who turned and shouted, "Make ready to get underway!"

Jimmy left the stunned Herbert standing on the deck and ran from the docks back through the town of Port Vykor toward where he hoped his gear was ready. He was impatient to leave, and impatient to reach Krondor. His only brother was still in Krondor, and unless Greylock could

get units south faster than Jimmy could go north, all that stood between

Dash and destruction was a few palace guards, the city militia, and a barely repaired city wall.

Erik shouted, "Get into that breach!"

Catapults on both sides of the line fired rocks and bundles of burning

hay. Large ballista bolts flew overhead and men lay screaming and dying.

The fighting had been underway since dawn the previous day, and night turned the scene hellish. The enemy had dug a series of trenches

backed by a high wall, upon which platforms held war engines.

Thousands

oil had been floated. The oil had been fired and was sending a black blanket of smoke across the ground.

Earl Richard had reviewed the defensive position and had been forced to agree that the only approach was a direct one. Erik had supervised the construction of a set of massive wooden bridges, set up to roll over logs

cut from the nearby woods. The first set of trenches had been difficult, because of the bow-fire from the wall above, but once he got his men underway, the trenches were quickly bridged. Soldiers frantically shoveled dirt across the top of the oil, banking the fires as the bridges were run across.

Fortunately for the Kingdom forces, when they reached the wall, they found a wooden stockade. It was brilliantly fashioned, and as stout as could be imagined, but being wood it could be cut. Men had died wielding axes at key locations, and when finally their work was done, chains with

large iron bars had been thrown through the gaps. The iron bars snapped sideways when pulled back and the chains were tied to draft horses. They had pulled down a twelve-foot-wide section of the wall, and the Kingdom forces were now pouring through. Erik waited for the huge gates across the highway to be opened so he could lead his cavalry through.

his men.

They did, and Erik said, "Follow me!"

He ran through the gate and the men behind him saw what had made Irl, stop the advance. Just behind the gate lay a pit ten feet deep, with sharpened wooden stakes. The gate was only six feet wider than the pit,

three on each side, so men could move around the pit, but a horse could not pass.

Erik urged his men through the smoke and blinked tears from his eyes. Where is all that smoke coming from?" he shouted.

"Over there," came the familiar voice of Jadow Shati.

Erik looked where his old friend pointed, and said, "Damn.")

"Yes, man, damn and damn again."

A

Raymond E. Feist

sands of men were lined up

Four hundred yards up the highway, thou

in ranks, with officers and cavalry mounted to the flanks and rear.

More

catapults, mangonels, and ballistae were apparent. This wasn't a

defensive

position. This army was making ready to attack.

Suddenly Erik saw what was about to happen. He glanced at the wall

through which he had fought and realized that if it were knocked down

survival.

Twenty-Two

EN STALKED THE woods.

Subai moved quietly but with purpose, following the river. Most of his men were dead, though two might have gotten over the ridge to make

their way along the eastern face of the mountains down to Darkmoor.

He
prayed it was so.

He had made it through a murderous journey lasting weeks. His

Pathfinders

had skills unmatched by any on Midkemia, save the elves and the Rangers of Natal. But Fadawah's defenses were bolstered by something far more terrible than mere human ability: they were aided by dark magic

Subai did not understand.

It became noticeable when they passed the first of the true southern defenses. Besides the death and destruction, there had been a feeling of

despair everywhere, as if a miasma of pain and hopelessness hung in the

air. The farther north they traveled, the worse the feeling became.

They saw little of the coastal defenses for a while, as they moved north

while the road to Quester's View turned northwest. When they reached the road from Quester's View to Hawk's Hollow, they encountered more indications of dark powers.

Not only had the northern ridge above that road been fortified, the southern ridge had been decorated with a grisly set of corpses.

Wooden

wearing
scars upon their cheeks and seemingly possessed of inhuman strength
and determination had chanced upon Subai's camp. From what
intelligence
Subai had read on the Emerald Queen Vs army, he knew these men
were most likely Immortals. originally the honor guard of the Priest-
King
of Lanada, they were ordinary soldiers turned into murderous fiends
by
black rites and a diet of drugs. The Emerald Queen had further
degenerated them, using one a night in
death rites to continue her eternal youth.

it had been thought they had fallen Out of favor with Fadawah, but
they seemed very evident on the approaches to Yabon.

For the next week they had been hunted, and two more men had
died, leaving it to Subai to order to his two remaining companions to
turn
east and find their way to Loriel, which was still held by the
Kingdom.

He hoped they would lead away the pursuing warriors.
Subai had effectively isolated himself in the hope that one man might
slip by where two would be noticed.

For a week he had journeyed past patrols and encampments, and each
time he saw another enemy band, his confidence in the Kingdom's
chances of regaining Yabon was eroded. The theory that only a core of
twenty or twenty-five thousand soldiers remained under Fadawah's
command

was in error. Given the numbers he knew to be deployed down
near Sarth and estimates of what it would have taken to overrun
LaMut,

realized his best bet was to strike for the Lake of the Sky, and
around the
northern tip of the Grey Towers and down into the elven forests.
Subai had no illusions. He had been chased for two days, since almost
reaching the Lake of the Sky. He didn't know if the men who were
behind
him were fanatics of Fadawah's or renegades, but either way he
kne,,,,, lie

needed to find a place to rest and something to eat. . of
He had had no provisions since a week after leaving the vicinity
Yabon City. He had foraged and found nuts and berries, as well as
snaring
a rabbit, but he hadn't eaten in the last two days, since being
spotted by
his pursuers. He was losing weight and energy, and was in no
condition

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SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

to fight more than one or two men. If five or six were after him, to
be
caught was to die.
He was following the southern bank of the River Crydee, which began
at the Lake of the Sky. He knew that soon he would be opposite woods
that were claimed by the elves, and that to enter them he would need
permission. He also knew that it was his only chance of safety. There
was
no way he could continue to follow the rift down to the castle at
Crydee,
or risk moving south through the Green Heart to the Jonril garrison.

didn't look back, but dodged into the woods, wishing he still had a bow.

He had watched it fall into a rocky crevasse when he was still in the mountains, two weeks before. With a bow he could have-stopped those after him.

He ran on.

The light was falling and Subai was disoriented, but he knew he was moving generally toward the west. Suddenly a voice from ahead challenged

him. "What do you seek in Elvandar, human?"

Subai halted. "I seek refuge and I bring messages," he said, leaning over with his hands on his knees as fatigue swept up over him.

"Who are you?"

"I am Captain Subai of the Royal Krondorian Pathfinders, and I bring

I

messages from Owen Greylock, Knight-Marshal of Krondor."

"Enter, Subai," said an elf, who seemed to step out of nowhere.

"There are men following me," said Subai, "agents of the invader, and I fear they will be upon us in minutes."

The elf shook his head. "None may enter Elvandar unbidden. Already they are being led away from us, and should they finally escape the woods,

they will be miles from here. Else they may wander until they starve."

Subai said, "Thank you for inviting me in."

The elf smiled and said, "I am called Adelin. I will guide you."

"Thanks," replied Subai. "I am almost done."

A

)Raymond E. Feist

at
the map and said, "We're holding."
Erik said, "We're losing."
The counteroffensive had rolled the Kingdom army back in confusion,
until Erik could order up reserves to blunt the assault. Now they
were five
miles south of the original point of contact, and night was falling.
Leland,

Richard's son, entered the tent and said, "We're routing them." He
was
a likable young,, man, nineteen years old, with a shock of blondish
brown
hair and wide-set blue eyes.

Erik said, "Hardly. They re withdrawing to their own lines until
morning.
They'll hit us again."

The young soldier was eager, and Erik had been pleased to discover
he kept his wits about him in the midst of battle. He officially was
a junior
officer attached to a company of soldiers from Deep Taunton, left to
bolster
the Army of the West when the Army of the East withdrew. But with his
father in command of the army, he was acting in an unofficial
capacity
as Lord Richard's adjutant and had picked up the responsibility of
relaying
orders to outlying units.

"What do we do next?" asked Richard.
Erik wiped his face with a towel and came over to look down at the
map. "We dig in. Jadow." he shouted over his shoulder.
A moment later, Jadow Shati appeared and said, "Erik?" Seeing the
Earl sitting there, he changed that to "Captain? Hello, m'lord."

build
up the berm with shields and let them form defensive positions. The
enemy's
horsemen can't overrun them easily, and the tendency will be for
men to move around the points of the diamond."
Richard said, "That funnels their men into these two constricted
areas
between the center and the sides."
"Yes," said Erik. "With luck they get jammed up in those constriction
points and our archers here"-he drew a line with his finger across
the
map behind the diamonds-"can wither any of the enemy who get
trapped there. We'll put a wall of swordsmen with shields in front of
them
in case the enemy gets past the diamonds in quantity."
"What about our horse?" asked Leland.
"They hold to each side of the outer diamonds. If we're lucky they
can prevent any flanking, and if the enemy retreats, we can unleash
them
to harry the enemy."
"Then what?" asked Richard.
"Then we lick our wounds, reorganize, and see if we can do something
about that mess up the road."
Reports were filtering back from men who had been cut off and lost
for a while behind enemy lines, and who returned to fill in gaps in
Erik's
knowledge of what was ahead of them. Along with Subai's reports,
carried
back by his first two couriers, Erik wasn't optimistic. The fact that
no
more Pathfinders had returned from Subai's journey was also a part of
that pessimism. With no firm picture of what lay closer to Ylith,
Erik's

hope of following the legs of Jason.
Erik shook his head. "I'm too tired to think. At this point it seems
Possible that our only choice is in the manner of our defeat: either
ride
home and dig in at Krondor, or get butchered as we continue to push
"Orth.I)

"Can we not get support from the sea?" asked Lord Richard.
Erik said, "Perhaps, up here, if we get past Quester's View. There're
a'lumber of coves and beaches where we could land men, but we lack
~"Ough ships to get the men there, don't have the proper boats for a

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SHARDS OIF A BROKEN CROWN

I Raymond E. Feist

landing, and if Fadawah positions men on the bluffs above, none of
our
men would reach the road."

Leland said, "You make it sound hopeless."

Erik said, "Right now, that's how I feel. Some sleep and a meal . I,
and

we'll see how I feel in the morning, but either way\$ I'm not going to
conclude anything on the basis of my feelings.'\$ a great deal of
war,

Richard said, "For one so young, you've seen
haven't you?y~

Erik nodded. "I'm not yet twenty-SiX Years of age, m'lord, yet I feel

old in my bones."

"Get some rest, suggested Richard.

ring the alarm," said Dash.

'What? asked Patrick, a look of incredulity on his face.

'I said ring the alarm. Spread word that a Keshian army is advancing and those soldiers hidden within the city will leap to attack. on the city,

the positions they're supposed to. only instead of taking our soldiers from behind, our soldiers will be waiting for them." 'Isn't that extreme?asked Duke Ruflo, recently arrived from Rodez.

Dash knew him slightly from his time at the King's Court in Rillanon, and knew him to be a no-nonsense sort of fellow. He was a competent administrator, an adequate military advisor, and a fair rider and swordsman, exactly the wrong man for Krondor on the brink of a crisis. Rufio would prove a fine administrator for a talented monarch served by a brilliant

general, thought Dash. unfortunately, he had only Patrick and Dash to depend on, and Dash was now certain he would have to improvise and be dazzling else Krondor would be lost.

'Yes, Your Grace, it is extreme," answered Dash, 'but it's better to flush them out when we're ready for them than to have them appeal e arc

behind us at the height of an attack. I've seen enOU .

weapons and food caches in the sewers so that armed insurrection inside the city can commence with any attack from outside.

learn in the rough and tumble of the docks at Rillanon, Patrick had been
visiting the eastern courts, learning diplomacy. Even as young men,
Dash
and Patrick had felt little affinity for one another. Dash was sure
Patrick
had redeeming qualities, but at this moment, he couldn't begin to
think
what they were.

"If you know who these men are," suggested Patrick, "the ones who
are secreting all these weapons and food, why don't you just arrest
them?"

"Because presently I have less than one hundred constables, and I
believe there are close to a thousand enemy soldiers scattered
throughout
the city. As soon as I arrest the first bunch, the rest will go to
ground.

And I don't know who all of them are. I think I've got some lying low
aboard ships off the coast, and there may be some in the caravansary
outside the gate, and who knows how many are lurking down in the
sewers.

"But if I ring the alarm bell, and you have the soldiers in the city
placed at key locations, between them and my constables, we can
eliminate
this threat."

Duke Rufio said, "I have two hundred soldiers en route from Rodez
who should be arriving here within the week. Perhaps when they
arrive?"

Dash tried mightily to hide his aggravation. He almost succeeded. "At
least let me employ more men," Dash pleaded.

Patrick said, "The treasury is low; you'll have to make due with what
You have."

so
/and/or. Dash: she said, sounding pleased to see him. It's been
long.~

"I've been busy," he said, still feeling nettled over Patrick's
dismissal
of his idea.

'Everyone has. Father tells me Your job is probably as
thankless as
anyone's in the palace, yet he thinks you're doing it well."

Thanks," said Dash. "Are you staying here
in Krondor, now that Duko Rufio has assumed office?"
"Father and I leave for Rillanon in a week," said Francie. "We have
to make plans For the wedding.
Francie nodded. "No one is supposed to know; the King will announce
it after things calm down " She looked troubled.

'What is it?
Lowering her voice she said, Have you heard anything frOm
jimmy?g\$
'No,' ' he said.

'I'm worried about him," said Francie. "He left in such a hurry and
we really had little chance to talk. about things."
Dash had no time for this. "Francie, he's fine, and as for talking
about
things, well, perhaps after the wedding, when patrick's returned and
you're
princess of Krondor, you can order him to come to a garden party
"Dash!" said Francie, looking hurt. ,Why are you being so
mean?"
Dash sighed. "Because . I'm tired, angry, frustrated, and because
your
future husband is being well, he's being Patrick. And if you want to

lady, I must be off. There's too much to do and I'm
already late."

"Good-bye, Dash," she said, and Dash detected a note of sadness in
her voice, as if they were parting forever.

-bye, Francie,~l he said as he turned and walked off. Here he
was trying to keep the city intact, and she was concerned with hurt
feelings

. Dash knew he was in a bad mood, but he also knew
it was well earned. And he knew he was likely to be in a worse one if
he didn't come
up with some way to neutralize those forces hostile to the crown
already
secreted inside the city.

Subai was astonished, as was every human upon first viewing
elvandar

. He had been led through the glades to the large surrounding

the heart of the elven forests, and when he had spied the giant trees
of
luminous colors he had been moved to his most expressive exclamation
in years. " Killian! What joy!" he had whispered.

Adelin said, "Of those beings you humans worship, we revere Killian
most. "

He led the tired and hungry Captain to the Queen's court, and by the
time Subai reached it, he felt far better than he had any reason to
expect.

He suspected it had something to do with the magic associated with
the
place, according to legend.

side,
and the third a simple blue robe with a corded belt.
Next to Tomas, Prince-Consort of Elvandar, stood a young-looking
elf, one who bore a resemblance to the Queen, and Subai deduced this
to
be her older son, Calin. To his left stood a familiar figure: Calis.
Next to

Calis was a man wearing leathers and a long grey cloak.
Subai said to the Queen, "The message is this, Fair Queen: an enemy
of great evil lies between our realms. Calis as much as any man knows
this evil He has faced it more than anyone, and knows it wears many
faces.

"What would you have of us?" asked the Queen.
Subai looked from face to face. "I do not know, Great Queen. I had
hoped to find the magician Pug here, for it may be we are at the
mercy
Of powers only he might face."

Tomas stood and said, "Should we have need of Pug I can promise
You a quick passage to him. He has returned to his island and can be
found there."

Calis said, "Mother, may I speak?" The Queen nodded, and Calis
said, "Subai, the Emerald Queen is dead and so is the demon who
destroyed

her. Surely the Kingdom can deal with the remaining invaders."
"I wish that it were so, Calis," said Subai. "But on my way here I
saw things that make me think we have again encountered more than
*we've suspected. I've seen the return of those men you told us of,
the

"Immortals, and other drinkers of blood. I've seen men, women, and
children
sacrificed up to dark powers. I've seen bodies piled in pits, and
mystic
fires burning in villages.

the Eagles.'~
Calis said, "This is Pahaman of Natal."
The man in grey put out his hand, and Subai said, "Our grandfathers were brothers."
,,our grandfathers were brothers," returned Pahaman.
Calis said, "An odd greeting."
Subai smiled. 'it's a ritual. The Pathfinders and the Rangers of Natal

are of like spirit. Never in the conflicts between the Free Cities and the Kingdom has a Ranger or Pathfinder spilled the other's blood."
Pahaman said, "In ancient times, when Kesh ruled, our ancestors were Imperial Guides. When the Empire retreated, many who were left behind became Rangers, and those who lived near Krondor founded the Pathfinders. All are kin, Pathfinder, Ranger, and Guide."
Calis said, "Would that all men knew they were kin. Come, let us feed you, Subai, and find you a place to sleep. While you dine, tell me what you've seen."
They departed.

Twenty-Three

THE MEN WALKED Softly.
Dash led his detachment through the cellar, each man carrying a large billy club and a dagger. The order was simple. If they resist, subdue them;
if they draw weapons, kill them.
All over the city, raids were being conducted, by constables and members of Patrick's Royal Household Guard. Patrick would not permit the

caravansary

were probably Keshian soldiers. The only comfort he drew from their going uncaught was that they were outside the wall and would remain so.

he had established checkpoints at the gate, on the pretext of needing a better census with the rebuilding of the city.

. They had reached a cellar in the northeastern portion of the city; the building was still burned-out, but Dash knew the door to the cellar had been restored. It had been scorched to look burned.

He had debated the best way to approach this task with himself all 'daY, and had finally elected to take the shock approach.

The upper cellar was deserted, but he knew the rear door led to a 'ramp down to the lower cellar, the one which opened onto the sewers.]He tested the door handle and found it unlatched. Gently he lifted it and

life and said, "More than anytiine since the Tomas turned to his W

Riftwar I fear we may not be free of involvement." d, &&Tathar?'

The Queen looked at her eldest counselor and sai

"We will wait upon Calis's return. After he has spoken to the hunlall

he will tell us how grave is the risk."

Prince Calin said, "I will join MY brother and listen, as well."

The Queen nodded, and the old warrior, Redtree, said, "What good would it do for us to leave Elvandar? We are few in number and could not tip the balance."

Tomas said, "I don't think that will be the question." He looked at

his own men, "Spread out and don't stop."
He walked purposefully toward the nearest man who looked in surprise at the men approaching. Then he saw the red armband and started to stand up. Dash shouted, "In the name of the Prince, surrender!" The man lying on the nearest pallet started to rise, but Dash lashed out with his billy club and knocked the man senseless. The other constables hurried forward, and one man who started to pull his sword was struck unconscious by three constables. Others raised hands in surrender, though one tried to run down a passage. One of the constables flung his billy along the floor, sending it skipping over the stones to strike the man in the back of the legs. He fell hard and before he could rise two other constables were on him.

Dash had the prisoners roped together with their hands tied behind them before they could organize a resistance. One of the newly deputized constables said, "That went easily enough, Sheriff." Dash said, "Don't get too comfortable. The rest of the night won't be this easy. "

At dawn Jimmy rose to find a worried-looking Marcel Duval standing over his sleeping roll. "Earl James," said the Squire from Bas-Tyra. "What is it?" asked Jimmy, getting up and trying to stretch at the same time. "Some of the horses are footsore, sir, and I was wondering if we might take a day to rest them." Jimmy blinked, not sure he was entirely awake. "Rest them?" "The pace has been punishing, sir, and some of these animals are

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merit, then counted slowly to ten. He took a deep breath, then shouted,
"Mount up!"

Everywhere men scrambled to get their horses saddled. Part of what made Jimmy irritable was that he knew the horses were being punished.

Duval's pretty bunch wouldn't be the only ones limping into Krondor, but he knew that by pushing this company, he'd reach the city in three more days. He just hoped that would be soon enough.

When the column was ready, Jimmy looked back and did a mental calculation. Five hundred cavalry and mounted infantry. The men were eating dried rations in the saddle, and already a few could be seen showing signs of illness. But sick or well, tired or rested, he was going to get them all to Krondor. They could tip the balance if the city was still intact when

they got there. Fighting back hunger and fatigue, he shouted, "Get something in your bellies while you can. In ten minutes we pick up the pace." Turning to the head of the line, he shouted, "Squire Duval, lead the column at the walk!" "Sir!" came the reply, and Duval led his fifty lancers out in the van.

As the sun crept above the horizon in the east and rose and yellow

the morning, and said, "They seem to fall over us."

"As I would in their place," said Erik. He held his helmet under his arm and pointed with his right hand. "If we hold the center, we can win the day. If either flank falls, I can plug the flow, but if the center falls, we must retreat."

Leland stood beside his father and said, "Then we will make certain,

the center doesn't fall." He donned his own helmet and said, "Father, may I join our men?"

"his father said, "Yes, MY boy." The lad ran off to where a groom

held his mount. Leland leaped into the saddle as his father said,

"Tithto-

nanka guide your blade, and Ruthia smile on you." The invocation Of the War God and Goddess of Luck was appropriate, thought Erik.

The invaders marched in irregular rhythm, without drummers or the other time-keepers Erik would have expected from Keshian or other kingdom

units. He had fought alongside most Of the men he now faced, and while he had been a spy in their midst, he felt little kinship for them. Still,

he respected their individual bravery, and it was clear that Fadawah had

forged them into an army instead of the disorganized bands of mounted soldiers they had been in Novindus. Now he saw heavy

infantry and foot supported by men with

infantry, companies of men with pikes advancing,

bucklers and axes. Behind sat men on horseback

shields and swords,

The messenger ran off and Erik turned to Richard. "Nothing to do now but fight . He walked to where a groom held his horse. He mounted and rode quickly forward, inspecting the position

of the three diamonds. As he had known would be the case, Jadow had the men positioned as well as they could be, and they were his hardest troops,

with the Crimson Eagles holding the centre diamond. Jadow waved from the center of the middle diamond and Erik saluted him. As an officer he could have delegated command to a Sergeant and remained with the horse units, but Erik knew that, at heart, Lieutenant Jadow Shati from the Vale of Dreams Would always be a Sergeant Tith-Onanka strengthen your arm.Erik shouted.

The men in the diamond cheered their commander.

Then the invaders broke formation and charged, and the battle was on.

Tomas watched as Acaila meditated. Tathar and another elf sat with him at three points of a triangle. Tomas had asked for their wisdom and

Acaila had agreed to use his mystic Powers to Provide guidance.

At the end of the Riftwar Tomas had vowed to never leave Elvandar unprotected. Now Tomas wondered if that oath would ultimately lead to the destruction of the thing he had sworn to protect.

knew ancient lore, lived through the luernor'es c

Tomas

a few Others, TOnlo

of the being

in their allegiance they shared themselves among the mightiest beings
creation and had no concept of their own delusions.
Tomas had over the years come to understand that what he knew
from Ashen-Shugar was truth as Ashen-Shugar knew it. He knew how
the ancient Valheru felt, thought, and remembered, but because the
Valheru
believed it true didn't make it so.
Alone of his kind, Ashen-Shugar avoided the influence of DrakinKorin,
who Tomas now knew was a pawn of the Nameless One, the god
whose name alone invites destruction. The human in Tomas considered
it ironic that the Nameless One used Valheru vanity and their own
certainty
of their omnipotence to destroy them eventually. The Valheru portion
of Tomas's nature felt rage at the thought his race had been nothing
more than a tool, and one used and discarded when it was no longer
effective.
Tomas looked at the three elves and knew it would be a while before
Acaila had wisdom to share. He left the contemplation glade and
walked
through Elvandar. Across the way he noticed Subai and Pahaman of
Natal
talking. Rangers rarely talked to anyone besides other Rangers and
occasionally
the elves, so Tomas knew that in Subai, Pahaman had found one
he considered kin.
The laughter of children pulled Tomas like a lodestone. He found a
dozen little ones playing a game of tag. Tomas saw his son, Calis,
sitting
next to the woman from across the sea, Ellia. They sat close, her
hand in
his, and Tomas felt a warmth toward his son. He knew that he would
never father another child, for it was a special magic that gave life
to his

entirely belonged. He smiled at Calis. Like his son, he had forged a place for himself, and was content with it.

Calis waved at his father and said, "Join us."

Ellia smiled at Tomas, but it was a smile tempered with uncertainty. Pid Of Ashen-Shugar's Valheru mind during the Riftwar and cleansed of "many of the lingering effects of that meld of human and Valheru by the stone, Tomas nevertheless bore the Valheru stamp upon him. To any the edhel-the elven races-there would almost be an instinctive response, a subservience that bordered on fear. tomas knelt next to his son.

there is much to be thankful for

Calis said, "Yes." He glanced at the woman at his side and she

smiled. Tomas was almost certain eventually they would wed The boys' father had died during the war in Novindus that had led to the invasion of the Kingdom. With a very low birthrate and a high percentage of by those who underwent the "recognition," the instinctive knowledge of who their mates were, there was little hope for a widow to find a second husband. As Calis had lived most of his life among humans and was half-human himself, there was no mate for him among his mother's people. Tomas felt that fate had chosen to deal kindly with his son by bringing this woman and her sons to Elvandar.

Tomas said, "There is much to concern us with the news Subai brings."

Calis looked down. .,I know. I feel as if it might be wise for me to

are
black of soul and have no hearts.?' She glanced at her sons playing.
tonly
a miracle sent Miranda to save us. They had killed all the other
children
in the village."

Tomas said, "I'm waiting for Acaila's wisdom on this, but I I think I
must fly to Sorcerer's Island and take council with Pug, as well.'

Calis said, "With the demon destroyed, I thought it but an issue
between
men.?)

Tomas shook his head. "If I understand a tenth of what I have been
told, it will never be merely an issue between men. There will always
be
far greater powers behind those men, and at each turn those powers
must be balanced."

Tomas stood up. 'I will see you at supper?

calis said, "I dine with Ellia and the boys."

Tomas smiled. "I will tell your mother."

He wandered through Elvandar, home for most of his life ' and as he
did every day) he marveled that he was allowed to live here. if there
was

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a more beautiful place in creation to live, he couldn't imagine it.

This was
part of his reason for vowing to never leave, to always be here to
protect
it, for he couldn't imagine the world without Elvandar.
He continued and found himself returning eventually to the
contemplation

he was certain they were alone, Acaila said, "Something dark still lingers in Krondor." He looked at Tomas. "Something wonderful, too. I cannot explain it, but an old power for good verges upon returning. Perhaps the universe is trying to put itself right."

Acaila led the Eldar, the ancient line of elves who had been closest to the Valheru. Tomas had come to value his counsel. He had a perspective unique and vast.

"But whatever force for good there is, the evil unleashed by the demon before it was destroyed is still stronger," Acaila continued. "That dark agency has servants, and they are building power in Ylith and Zun and now in LaMut."

"What Subai said about human sacrifice?"

Acaila said, "It is a thing of great evil and great power, and it grows by the day. The servants of such evil often are dupes and have no idea of what they bring upon themselves as well as others. They do not know they destroy their own souls first. As soulless men they feel no remorse, no shame, no regret. They merely act on impulse, seeking what they think they want, glory, power, wealth, the trappings of might. They do not realize they have already lost and anything they do serves only waste and destruction.

Tomas was silent for a while, then said, "I have Valheru memory, so those impulses are well known to me."

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and it must be rooted out and destroyed. And to do so, the forces
which

strive to endure and survive the onslaught will need help."

Tomas said, "So I leave to lend my strength."

Acaila said, "Of all of us here, you alone have the means to tip the
balance to good."

"I will leave and find Pug," said Tomas. "Together we will do what
we must to save the Kingdom and prevent the rise of this evil in

Krondor. "

"Go to the Queen," said Acaila, "and know whatever you do, you
do for her and your son."

Tomas gripped Acaila's hand and left.

Later that night, after dining with his wife and a lingering good-
bye,

Tomas returned to the clearing north of the center of the forest. He
was

now dressed in his white-and-gold armor. A legacy of an ancient past,
the

armor was without blemish or scratch. He had reclaimed his golden
sword

with the white hilt when his son had unraveled the mystery of the
Lifestone.

His hand rested on its hilt, and he wore his white shield with the
golden dragon emblazoned on it over his shoulder. He looked to the

sky
and sent forth a call. He waited.

Men lay dead and dying on all sides. Erik stood exhausted, a mound
of dead enemies before him. Sometime during the afternoon his horse

had
gone out from under him courtesy of a stray arrow.

Erik and I got up and said, "My father's compliments, Captain."
Erik nodded, trying to get his thoughts organized. "I'll be along presently,
Lieutenant. "
Erik bent and cleaned his sword on the tunic of a dead man before him, then put it in his scabbard and looked over the field. He had ended
UP in the gap between the center diamond and the one on the right.
the
bodies before him were waist-high. He turned toward Jadow Shati, who
yelled, "I hope we don't have to do that again anytime soon, man!"
Erik waved. "Not until tomorrow." He headed toward Earl Richard's
tent. When he got there he found two bodies being dragged out of the
tent by guards, and the old Earl sitting at his table with an orderly
his arm.

"What happened?" asked Erik.

"Some of the enemy

pushed my unit back on your left flank, Captain, and actually

got here. I finally got to use this sword.

"How do you feel?" asked Erik.

"Like hell, Captain. " He looked at the orderly, who finished tying
off
the bandage, and waved him away. "Still, I can at last feel like a
soldier.

"You know," he said, leaning back, "I once rode a patrol, and we
saw some Keshians who ran across the border when they saw us, and

-F Oying. ur men

t "reak them," said Richard.

"NO," said Erik. "and each day we fight out here in the middle of the road, our chances of reaching Ylith diminish, and our h Yabon becomes faint."

"We need some sort of magic," said Richard.

I'm short of magic right now,,,,,

said Erik, standing up. "I had better see how the men are." He saluted and left the tent.

He encountered Leland outside and said, "Your fathers fine; his wound is slight.'

Leland's face reflected his relief. Erik's estimation Of the boy rose; he

had gone about his business not knowing how his father fared.

Erik asked, "How are the reserves?,,

"They stand ready," said Leland.

Erik was relieved. "I lost track in the afternoon and didn't remember if they had been called up.,,

"TheY were not, Captain.

tell the cay

'good, order the men inside the diamonds relieved and

stand down. Get the men fed. Then come back. I have a job for you.'

Leland saluted and hurried off. Erik made his way to his Own modest tent among the Crimson Eagles and sat down. Commissary soldiers hurried with water

...could have been worse
,,i know," said Erik. "We've got to come up with something brilliant
and unexpected, or we're going to lose this war.
'I thought it was something like that,?' said Jadow. ,Maybe if we
could launch a counteroffensive we could bleed them enough tomorrow
and punch through their center, leaving their forces divided."

Erik was almost finished eating when a messenger found him.
Richard's compliments, sir. Would you attend him at once.
Erik rose and followed the youngster and returned to the command
tent.

There he found a terrified-looking scribe standing next to Earl
Richard. 'This just came in a few minutes ago
" Richard said to Erik.

Erik read JIMMY's message and said, "Gods!"
Richard said, "what do you think we should do?"
,,if we take any of our forces south, we lose Yabon. if we keep them
here, we lose Krondor."

Richard said, t(We must preserve Krondor. We can hold here and, if
we must,]postpone the campaign to retake yabon until next year.'
Erik said, 'This is impossible." He was silent for a minute, then
said,
,,my lord, if you'll allow me?"
The Earl said, 'I always do, Erik. You haven't made a mistake so
far." The old Earl had come to recognize Erik's talents and his utter
lack

of personal ambition and would ratify any decision Erik made.
Erik said, "Send for Jadow Shati."
While the messenger was gone, Erik questioned the scribe and found
the man completely ignorant of Most Of the things Erik wanted to
know.
He did. however, impress upon Erik the level of concern and agitatiOn

the new northern border until I tell you otherwise.

"What sort of fortifications?"

"I want a six-foot-high earthen breastwork a hundred yards north of the three diamonds. When that's done, start building a wall. Fell trees to the south and get on it. I want it twelve feet high, reinforced, with an archery platform every twenty yards. I want two ballista ports every hundred

feet, and a clear line of fire to the rear for catapults, so they can launch stones without knocking our own men off the walls."

"Man, how long is this thing to be?"

"From the cliffs overlooking the sea to the steepest hill you can find."

"Erik, that's more than two miles!"

"Then you'd better start now."

Leland of Malkuric appeared. "The cavalry is standing down, sir."

"Good," said Erik. "At first light I want you leading them down the coast, back to Krondor."

"Krondor?" said the youth, looking at his father.

The old Earl nodded. "It appears our old friends the Keshians are about to launch an assault on the city. Earl James of Vencar requests reinforcements."

"But what about the fight here?" asked the youth.

"You just get south and save Krondor, lad," said Erik. "Leave this area to me."

"Yes, sir," said the lad. "Which units, sir?"

"Every horseman we have. We can dig in and hold here for the rest of the summer with the footmen, but they can't reach Krondor in anything under three weeks.

in Krondor in a week."

"Yes, sir!" said Leland. He turned and left to carry out his orders. Erik balled his fist and looked skyward. "Damn!" he said. "I just thought up a way to dig those bastards out from behind that fortress to the north, and this has to happen."

Jadow, who had been about to leave when Leland appeared, said, "You know they say Tith-Onanka runs a soldier's life, but I got to tell

YOU, man, Banath seems to run my little corner of the world." He left.

Erik nodded. "Banath runs mine too, it seems." The God of Thieves was also known as "The Prankster," and was commonly given credit for everything that went wrong.

Erik looked at the old Earl, who said, "We do what we can.

Erik nodded, and silently left the tent, feeling as defeated as he had ever felt in his life.

Dash roused himself and rubbed his eyes. He had given up on staying awake during the afternoon unless an emergency occurred. There was too much to do after darkness fell.

He began his day at sundown and worked throughout the night, with his mornings spent at the palace or sorting out problems around the city.

About noon, if the gods were kind, he would collapse into his bed at the rear of the New Market Jail and fall into an exhausted sleep. Six or seven

hours later, he would be roused.

He had received unexpected help from the Mockers in locating the

Dash entered the room, his common look, used as a squad room by the constabulary, he realized he had overslept, and it was at least an hour after he had planned to be up. He asked one of the constables, "what time is it?" "Eight Of the clock about fifteen minutes ago. He's been waiting here an hour. We wouldn't let him wake you. The constable was pointing at a court age. "What is it?" he asked.

The lad handed him a note. ,The prince wishes you at the palace at once, sir," said the boy. Dash read it and winced. He had completely forgotten he had been at the palace and had agreed to go. ,I,ll be invited to dinner this evening along shOrtly," said Dash.ith Patrick even more than usual and Prob. Lately he was unhappy W on. Dash realized he had forgotten the invitati ably that was the reason any fashion he wished? with of e could certainly operate rity was Dasills that the Pnnc that the city's secu without Dash s approval, but given of Patrick\$ S which made security

responsibility, he resented those decisions it that much more difficult to insure.g the prince angry wao things from Patrick, and niakin Dash wanted to make Patrick understand how S~ngerOlo a good way to do that. He had things were right now. o impress upon Patrick the mere fact that ham Dash couldn't seem t

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had two Keshian agents inside the palace walls was a major source of

return gave instructions on the night of Tard and put Sabbar in charge of the most delicate one; he had come to trust the former mercenary as a steady influence on the other men. Dash got his horse and rode to the palace.

As he rode through the city, Dash registered the rhythm of the place, becoming more familiar by the day. Krondor was reviving and it angered him to the point of irrationality that anyone, Keshian or Fadawah, might return to undo the work he had done. Rillanon had been his home until three years before, when his grandfather had brought Dash and his brother to Krondor. Since then he had worked for a while for Roo Avery, though he was always in his grandfather's employ. And against any reasonable expectation he had made the city his own.

As he neared the palace, Dash conceded there was more of his grandfather in him than he might have once been willing to admit. Dash rode in past a pair of guards at the main gate who saluted the Sheriff. A groom hurried forward to take his horse. Dash moved quickly up the palace steps and past guards standing in the entrance hall.

He was hurrying to the point of almost running as he rounded the corner that would take him directly to the great hall. Instantly he knew something was wrong.

The great doors were open and a pair of guards stood just inside, as if inquiring over something. A servant was running from the hall, toward the rear of the palace, shouting something.

Dash ran. He pushed past the two guards at the door and saw people

Others were attempting to stand, and one or two were sitting, a vacant disoriented expression on their faces.

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Dash ran across the room I to the head table and vaulted over it, swinging his legs over the prone form of Duke Brian. Francie was slumped over the table between her father and Patrick, and Duke E.ufio had fallen to the floor and was lying on his back, eyes open and vacant. The Prince sat back in his chair gasping for air, his eyes wide and unfocused. Dash stuck his finger into the Prince's mouth, and Patrick vomited the contents of his stomach. He repeated the action with Francie, who also threw up what she had eaten. He turned to see startled-looking servants and guards standing around, unsure of what to do. "Make them vomit!,, shouted Dash. "They've been poisoned!" food, but far less than He reached Duke Silden and got him to gag up could not force a Dash would have liked. He reached Duke Rufio and response. The Duke's breathing was shallow and his face was clammy to the touch. Dash jumped up and saw that three of the servants were attempting to get those still conscious to throw up. He shouted to a guard, "Get a horse! Ride to Temple Square' Bring back any clerics You can find. We need healers!" Dash organized the servants and had more come bringing fresh water. He had no idea what poison had been used, but he knew that some of them could be diluted. "Make those who can drink swallow as much as

to arrive, a priest of Astalon. He set about doing what he could do for the stricken,

starting with the Prince.

Dash did a mental inventory of those in attendance: of the nobles ill Krondor, only he had been absent from this meal. Every other titled lord from Duke to Squire in the area was at that table. Of the town,s wealthy

and powerful merchants, only Roo Avery was absent, being out at h's estate with his family.

Soon other priests of the various orders appeared, including]brOther Dominic, the Ishapian who now served at Nakor's temple. They tended those in the room throughout the night, and Dash interrogated the kitchen"

staff. Near sunrise he returned to the great hall, which now resembled

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infirmary. Dominic was near the door and Dash called him over. "How do we stand?" he asked.

"It was a close thing," said the monk. "Had you not acted as you

had, you would be the only noble in the city still breathing.

"The Prince will live, though he will be sick for a long time, as will

the Lady Francine." He shook his head. "Her father is touch and go. I don't know if he'll pull through."

Dash said, "Duke Rufio?"

Dominic shook his head in the negative. "It was the wine that was

Then the alarm bell began to ring and Dash realized the city was under attack.

I

OR

Twenty-Four

DASH RACED down the street.

People ran through the streets while soldiers raced to the walls. The gates were closing and a panic-stricken constable in charge of the gate

A "sheriff.. A rider raced in claiming there's a Keshian army

check za ~

~~minef un the road."

and said,

'Bar the gate," said Dash. He grabbed the cons

"What's your name?'"

'Delwin, sir," said the agitated young man.

"You're now a Sergeant, understand?"

The man nodded, then said, "But we don't have sergeants in the

constabulary, sir.l?

"Come with me."

'right now, you're in the army, ash s o wall above the gate

He led Delwin up the steps to the ramparts on the

and looked to the east. The sun was rising over the distant mountains

and

caused him to squint.

sergeant Berlin hurried off. Dash looked to his right and saw a sergeant of the Palace Guard hurrying toward him. Dash grabbed

him and said, "What's your name?"

„McCally, sir."

"Your Captain is either dead or very sick; I do not know which.

are there any other officers around?"

"Lieutenant Yardley has the duty, sir, and should be above the palace

"Go fetch him and tell him I need him here at once."

The Sergeant ran off and returned a few minutes later with the

Lieutenant. "

Sir," said the Lieutenant, "what are your orders?"

Dash said, "As Baron of the court and Sheriff of Krondor, I find I

am the only functioning noble in the city. How many officers escaped

the

poisoning last night?"

"Four, sir, of which I am senior."

"You are now an acting Captain, Yardley. How many men have we?"

Yardley spoke without hesitation, "We have five hundred members

of the Prince's Household Guards, and fifteen hundred members of the

city garrison, spread out around the city. I don't know the current

number

of your constables, sir."

"Slightly better than two hundred. What about guards who came with

the nobles last night?"

"Maybe another three hundred, honor guards, personal retinues,"

replied

the newly made Captain.

"Very well, have them support your men on the palace walls. Have

whoever's in charge of the city garrison find me here and report."

Yardley ran off, and a short time later a grey-haired old sergeant

appeared. "

old man smiled and came to attention. With a glint in his eye, he said, "I had hoped for a promotion before I retired, sir!" He then lost

his smile. "If I may be so bold, who then are you to be?"

"Me?" said Dash with a bitter laugh. "I get to play the part of the Prince of Krondor until Patrick's strong enough to stand."

"Well, then, Highness," said the Sergeant in a semi-mocking tone, "I respectfully submit we better quit larking about and get ready to defend

this city."y He pointed to the advancing column in the distance.

"That lot doesn't appear very tender to me."

"Right you are," said Dash with a tired smile. "I want you to deploy three men in four on the walls. I want the remaining men held in reserve."

"Sir!" said Mackey with a salute. As Mackey ran off, Gustaf and the

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sh yelled down, constables ran down High Street toward the main gate. Da

"How did the raids go last night?"

Gustaf shouted, "We netted another score of the bastards, but I know there are more out there."

"Here's the duty: call martial law and tell everyone to remain in their

houses. Then I want the constables to check all the places we've talked

about. Gustaf knew exactly what Dash meant: those places within the city vulnerable to attack from within. "Then sweep the city and arrest

anyone on the streets. Then report back to the jail and wait."

"Wait for what, Sheriff?"

"Wait for word the Keshians are breaching the defenses, then come

Erik leaned over, perspiration dripping off his brow, as the enemy retreated once more. He stood at the point of the center diamond, the dead piled outside the shield wall to chest height. He turned when someone touched his shoulder and saw Jadow behind him, his face a mask of red from the splattered blood. "We held," said the Lieutenant. "We did it.)~

The attack had been unrelenting; a wave of soldiers who had simply pushed themselves upon the waiting defenses of the Kingdom. Erik had been able to repulse them without having to rely on horses which he no longer had. The left diamond had threatened to collapse at one point, but a reserve company had been thrown in and the enemy pushed back. Archers had continued a slaughter between the diamonds and two flying companies had been able to respond to threatened flanking attacks from either side. On the whole, it had been a masterful defense.

Erik said to Jadow, "I'm worried about arrows. Get scavengers out there picking up as many as can be salvaged."

Jadow hurried off and Erik waved over another soldier, named WiW. "Run to the command tent and inform Earl Richard I'll be along presently, and ask him if any supply trains have caught up with us. then

come back here and report."

Erik was handed a waterskin by a commissary and he drank greedily.

He then poured water over his face and wiped off whatever blood and dirt he could.

Around him men were pushing bodies outside the diamonds. The

supplies and was concerned, because a baggage train due to arrive the previous day was overdue. He had dispatched a patrol to the south to find them and hurry them along. While a smith's apprentice, Erik had tended

mules and donkeys and knew they were even more fractious and difficult at times than horses, but now he was concerned that something beyond a difficult team or two was slowing down the supplies.

Jadow said, "Man, that was some fight."

"Not much in it, save stand and slaughter."

"Nightmare Ridge all over again."

Erik hiked his thumb at the enemy. "They're not very smart, but they are fearless."

"I've been thinking," said Jadow. "We know that those we faced before were under some spell or another, a demon or what have you, according to the rumors, and that's why they fell apart after the battle at the ridge, but they don't seem to have learned anything over the winter."

"I know what you mean," said Erik. "From everything we know about Fadawah, I'd expect something different. He must have discovered by now that we're not going to chase him." Erik rubbed his hand over his face as if he could wipe away the fatigue.

,Wilks returned and said, "CaptAin, Earl Richmond awaits your report and told me to tell you the baggage train has arrived."

."Good," said Erik, "I was beginning to worry." To Jadow, he said,

"Relieve the men in the diamonds and get something to eat."

"Sir," said Jadow with a casual salute.

but eating and sleeping, but during war few got to do what they wished for.

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Erik knew they'd not have spearpoints, but sharpened, fire-hardened stakes would serve to keep enemy horse at bay. And other weapons would be in the baggage, machine parts for constructing catapults, oil or burning out underground tunnels and firing wooden defenses. - I..s. Erik began to feel optimistic about being able to hold the position. He had no thought at this moment about advancing, not with his entire detachment of horse soldiers dashing toward Krondor. He reached the command tent and found the Earl sitting at his command table. "How is the arm, sir?" "Fine," said Richard. He smiled. "Do you want to know why our baggage is late?" "I was wondering," admitted Erik as he poured himself a mug of ale from a pitcher on the table. "Leland forced them off the road," said Richard, "so he could get down to Krondor. Some of the wagons got stuck in the mud and it took a half-day to get them out." "Well," said Erik with a laugh, "I'd have rather had them here yesterday, but as long as they're going to be late, I'll settle for that reason; I was afraid they'd been ambushed." Hot wet towels were provided and Erik washed up. A servant went to his tent and returned with a fresh tunic, and Erik sat with the Earl, the

There was even a hint of green in all this, and you found it.

Erik said, "Unfortunately, that may be about all the good there is to wringing out of this situation. I would trade all the hot bread in the world

to be outside the gates of Ylith, ready to storm the city with our army."

"Someone once said that you can make all the plans you wish, but they all go to naught as soon as the first elements in your army encounter

the enemy."

"My experience is that is true."

"The truly great field commanders can improvise"-Richard looked at Erik-"as you do."

"Thank you, but I'm far from being anyone's notion of a great general.

"You underestimate yourself, Erik."

"I wanted to be a smith."

'Truth?')

"Truth. I was apprenticed to a drunk who failed to register my name with the guild, and had he, I would probably have been

urleodyewdhilfr(

Darkmoor before I killed my half-brother.

ly He went onmaanndfoutlinede

satroargyeof how he had become a soldier, from murdering over Manfred's rape of Rosalyn, the girl who had been like a sister to Erik, and being tried and convicted of murder. He told him of being

pulled from prison by Bobby de Loungville, Lord James, and Calis, and the journeys to Novindus.

When he was done, Lord Richard said, "A remarkable story, Eli

Erik said, "I am unsuited for it; there is so much I don't know About strategy, long-range Planning, the political consequences of things.,,

"The fact You know those issues exist places you ahead Of most Of us who might be selected for the position on the basis of who our fathers

were, Erik. Don't underestimate yourself.'

Erik shrugged. "I don't think I am, Richard. I'm Captain of the Crimson

Eagles, and a Court Baron as a result. That's far more than I wished to be. I thought I had everything I wanted when I was named Sergeant. I Only want to serve as a soldier."

"Sometimes we have no choice," said Richard. ('I wanted to grow roses. I love my gardens. I don't think I'm happier than when I'm showing

guests through them. I amuse MY wife and annoy our groundskeeper no end by puttering around out there, on MY hands and knees, pulling weeds. ~

Erik smiled at the image of the old man out there in the dirt. "Yet You do it.

'It makes me happy. Find what makes you happy, Erik, and hold to it.'

, , MY wife, doing a good job, the company of friends," said Erik.

',I

,an't think of much more."

"You'll do, Erik von Darkmoor. You'll do very well

YOU for

w catness. II

They talked late into the night.

...was the case?

Pug didn't want to be bothered by casual travelers, it seemed. When Nakor had been in charge of the island, he had relied on the reputation

of the place, coupled with a menacing-looking castle with blue light flickering in the tower windows . Now the defensive magic was stronger. Nakor had to correct the Captain's course, because while in the fog the tillerman was letting the ship curve away from the island.

In the distance he heard the sound of surf and said, "Get ready to lower sails, Captain. We're almost there."

"How can you-"

Suddenly they were out of the fog, in brilliant daylight. Members of the crew looked over their shoulders and saw a wall of fog which circled

the island like a fortress.

The castle still stood atop the cliffs, a looming black presence that seemed to cast a pall over the area. "Should we move farther down the coast?" asked the Captain.

"This is very good," said Nakor. "They've added some n

He looked at the Captain. "Everything is fine. you just lower a boat, drop

me on the beach, then You can go back to Krondor."

The relief was obvious on the man's face. "How do we plot Our course? '~

just sail through the fog, that way." Nakor pointed.

if you're turnee around a little in the fog, that's fine, because it will want to turn you away

from the island anyway. You'll come out more or less pointed east, and

you can get Your bearings off the sun or stars.

The Captain tried to look reassured, but failed.

The sails were hauled in and a boat lowered, and within an hour

Nakor
didn't even bother using the energy needed to shift his perceptions,
as he
knew that when he reached the limit of the illusion he would pass
from
the seemingly wild woodlands into a lovely pasture, dominated by a
rambling
villa.
When the illusion finally did shift, Nakor almost tripped in
surprise.
For while the landscape was as he had expected it to be, there was
one
feature that was totally unexpected. A golden dragon rested
comfortably
next to the house, apparently asleep.
Nakor hiked up his faded orange robe and hurried on spindly shanks
until he was before the dragon. "Ryana!" he shouted.
The dragon opened one eye and said, "Hello, Nakor. Is there a reason
you're waking me?"
"Why don't you change and come inside?"
"Because it's more comfortable sleeping like this," said the dragon,
her voice revealing her mood as less than pleased.
"Late night?"
"Flying all night. Tomas asked me to bring him."
"Tomas is here! That is wonderful news."
"You may be the only one in Midkemia to think so," rejoined the
dragon.
"No, I don't mean the reason he's here, I mean the fact he's here.
That means I don't have to explain things to Pug."
"Probably for the best," said the dragon as a nimbus of golden light
surrounded her. Her form shimmered, the edges blurring, and the fight
seemed to shrink until she was human size. Then she resolved into the
form of a striking woman with reddish blond hair, enormous blue eyes,

Pug's
~'voice said, "Come in."

Ryana entered first, and Nakor came in behind her. Pug's study was large, with a broad windowseat upon which Miranda sat. Tomas sat uncomfortably in a chair that was obviously a little too small for him, while Pug sat facing the two of them. If either Tomas or Pug were surprised to see Nakor, neither showed it. Miranda grinned. "Why am I not emnsed to see you here?"

(&I give up," said Nakor sitting down. "So, what are we to do?" All eyes turned toward him, and Pug said, ""y don't you tell us?" Nakor opened his sack and reached in, up to his shoulder, as if feeling around. Everyone in the room had seen him do the trick before, but the effect was still comic. He fished out an orange and said, "Anyone want one

Miranda held up her hand and Nakor tossed it to her. He got another one for himself. Nakor began to peel the orange. "Something amazing happened in Krondor last week. A terrible thing and a wonderful thing.

Or they were both the same thing. Anyway, one of my students, a very special woman named Aleta, was studying with Sho Pi-meditation, just the basics-when suddenly a light gathered around her. She rose in the air, and below her, trapped, was a very black thing."

"A black thing?" asked Miranda. "Could you be a little more specific?"

"I don't know what to call it," said Nakor. "It's energy, perhaps a spirit of some sort. Maybe by now some of the other clerics from the

say something, then hesitated. "A moment. He made a broad gesture with his hands and waved over his head, then the room crackled with energy.

Tomas smiled. "Don't lower the barrier prematurely this time-'\$ Nakor grinned in embarrassment. The last time he had used this mystic shield to protect them, he had lowered it too soon and the demon Jakan had located them. "I put the field around the room. I,II just leave

it up permanently. No agency of Nalar's will ever be able to spy Or' this

room. Now we can talk without falling under his sway." in his At the mention of Nalar's name, Pug felt a prickling sensation head for a moment, and suddenly barriers to his memory were lowered. Images and voices swam in his consciousness, and things he had placed apart in his mind were now accessible to him. "We must assume the Nameless One has more servants."

"Obviously," said Tomas. "The human sacrifices and other slaughter are means for gathering power."

"What fascinates me," said Nakor, "is what is happening in Krondor. ' y

Pug smiled at his occasional companion. "Obviously this new faith of yours is having a direct effect."

"Yes, but that's what I find odd and fascinating." He pulled a section

from his orange and ate it. "I am no expert on issues of faith, but I had

the distinct impression it would take a few centuries or longer for our new

temple to have any effect."

Miranda said, "Don't give yourself too much credit, Nakor. It may

Tomas said, "Subai leads me to think that Elvandar will soon be at risk if we do not stop this army now."
Nakor leaped out of his chair. "No. You are not listening." He stopped, then said, "Or I am not saying this right. We are not trying to save Elvandar, or Krondor, or the Kingdom." He looked from face to face. "We are trying to save this world."
Ryana said, "Very well, Nakor. You now have my undivided attention. These petty human wars are nothing to dragonkind, but we share this world with you. What is the threat to us all?"
"This Mad God, this Nalar, whose very name is a danger, he is the threat. When you look at everything that has occurred since the Chaos Wars, remember this. When you once again forget the very conversation we have this hour, when your memories are locked away to prevent you from falling under Nalar's sway, remember this much: there is always something deeper behind what you see on the surface."

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"All right," said Pug. "So what we see on the surface, the invasion and the conquest by Fadawah, they hide a deeper truth."
"Yes, Fadawah is a dupe. He was before and he is still. He is just the next to be placed at the head of this murderous army. We must identify whoever it is that stands behind him, in the shadow. There is something evil growing in Krondor. It is there against the time Fadawah's army arrives. Whoever is behind Fadawah-an advisor, or servant, or a member of his guard-must be destroyed. Somewhere is a being who was there when the my old wife, Jorma, became Lady Clovis, when she was controlling

Nakoras said, "Do you suspect another Fadaewian?
Nakor said, "I don't think so. Maybe, but it may also be a man, or a
dark elf, or any other manner of creature. It may be a spirit in the
body
of one such as Fadawah. I just don't know. But we must seek out this
creature and destroy it."

Pug said, "This sounds as if we must fly to the heart of the enemy
and confront their leader."

Nakor said, "Yes, and that is dangerous."

Pug winced in memory of the trap the demon had laid for him, the
one that in his arrogance he had overlooked, the trap that had almost
cost

Pug his life.

"Why don't we just ... I don't know," said Miranda, "just burn
everything within a mile of Fadawah's headquarters? That should end
this
creature, shouldn't it?"

Pug said, "Probably not. Years ago I faced another of Nalar's
creatures,
a mad magician named Sidi. A few of the older members of the
temples know the story, for we strove to control the Tear of the
Gods."

Ryana said, "Tear of the Gods?"

Pug said, "It is a powerful artifact, used by the Ishapians to
channel
power from the controller gods." He looked at Miranda. ,you could
burn
g there

this house down around Sidi and he would have been standing
laughing at you when the ashes cooled."

"How did you destroy him?" asked Miranda.

Pug looked at his wife. "I didn't."

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now: asked Miranda:

Pug nodded. "Me. I have to be bait. Fadawah's true master must know that at some point I will act. I have in the past. And we can assume

there's some sort of surprise waiting for me if I show up."

Miranda said, "No! The last time I goaded you into acting prematurely,

you almost got killed. Since then I think I've changed my mind about kicking down doors and walking into rooms. Let's sneak around some first."

Nakor said, "I've snuck around in the enemy's camp, back when I went to Novindus with Calis and his friends, and I stood close to the Emerald Queen. I couldn't tell who was running things. Pug is right.

We must find a way to force this person or creature or spirit or whatever it is to reveal itself to us."

Miranda said, "No! And I'm going to keep saying 'no' until you get it through your head. " She stood up. "I've snuck around behind the lines,

too. Let Nakor and me do it one more time. We can go to where Greylock'

s army is, and I know we can sneak into the camp. Let me get close to Fadawah and see what I can see. If we can't find anything, I'll agree

to go in and let them throw everything at you. But I don't want to risk it

just Yet. All right?" She touched his face.

"Your temper is going to get you killed," he warned her.

"I can keep it under control when I have to."

Pug looked at Nakor. "I want you to promise me you'll tell her when

fly
know a village on the coast. We'll transport shore, when we can.

"P the coast."

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Ryana said, "I'm going to go sleep. Wake me when you have someone worth fighting."

Nakor said, "A moment, please." Pug and the others felt their memories

shut off again, hiding knowledge of Nalar, and then the mystic barrier

was lowered. I

Tomas said, ' Sleep well, friend. The dragon in human form left the room.

Miranda took Nakor's hand and they vanished from sight, leaving Pug and Tomas alone.

Tomas removed his golden helm and placed it on Pug's desk. "Well, old friend, there's not much for us to do but wait."

Pug said, "I'm not very hungry but we should eat." He rose and led his friend out of the study, down the hall, and toward the kitchen.

"You better land soon!" shouted Nakor. g,My arms are getting tired."

They were flying to the east of the highway, just above the treetops, with Nakor dangling from his staff, which Miranda held below her as she

flew. They had appeared at a fishing village near Quester's View. It had

been deserted. Miranda had picked up Nakor and had flow across the highway, some distance away from a few campfires, and then had turned northward. They had flown past the campfires of both sides, past a large

static position that had Nakor puzzled. He knew something significant had occurred for Greylock to have halted his northward march.

She said, "Not until Pug and I feel the world is a safer place than it

is right now."

"Being alive is being at risk," said Nakor as he adjusted his garment and recovered his staff. "Now, let us see if we can sneak into the enemy

camp.')

"How do you propose to do it?"

"Like I always do: act like I belong. Just stay close behind me and'

please, one thing."

'What?

"Don't lose your temper."

Miranda's expression clouded and she said, "I don't have a temper!"

Nakor grinned. "There, you're doing it now."

"You insufferable little man!" she said, walking off ahead of him.

"Miranda."

"V,what!" she shouted, looking over her shoulder.

Nakor hurried to catch up, and said, "For a woman of your experience, you can be very childish."

Miranda seemed on the verge of saying something. She stood still for a moment, then finally said, "You don't know me, Nakor. You may have been my mother's first husband, but you know nothing of me. You don't know what my childhood was like. You don't know what it was to be raised by imperial agents. If I'm childish, it may be because I had no

childhood."

"Whatever the reasons, please try to keep from getting us killed," said

Nakor as he walked by her. Softly he said, "And for a woman your age,

can drag it with you, forever looking over your shoulder at what holds you back. Or you can let it go and move forward. It's your choice. For

those who live centuries, it's a very important choice."

He turned and walked away from her.

Miranda stood a moment, then caught up with him again. This time she said nothing.

They worked their way down through trees on the western face of the Calastius Mountains. They had passed the battlelines several miles to the south, where Greylock's army had established a fixed front. Nakor said,

"Something strange has happened. Greylock is dug in down south, at least

that's what it looked like from up there"-he pointed skyward-"as you sped along. It looks like he's digging in, perhaps against a counterattack."

Miranda said, "I don't know. Maybe they're going to wait for supplies sent up to that fishing village where we landed."

"Maybe, but I don't think so." From the battlefield the stench of the dead filled the night air. Thousands of bodies littered the field.

"This is very bad. To leave the dead unburied is an evil thing."

North of the battlefield a structure was being built. It appeared to be

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ù fortress of some type, but as they neared it, they could see it was
* actually

of all sizes and colors. They scurried through the heavy boles until they found a gap between two campfires, where they could slip in without attracting undue attention.

They passed by unchallenged. Nakor led Miranda past a series of campsites, where they were just two people among several walking about on some errand or another. But as they passed a large camp, a man walked toward them. His head was shaved, save for a single fall of hair, tied up to cascade behind him. The hair looked to be cinched by a ring of bone.

He wore deep scars on each cheek. He was bare chested and wore a vest of what appeared to be human skin. His trousers were dyed leather and Nakor didn't inspect them too closely. He was massively muscled and carried a huge curved blade known as a flasher. It was a two-handed weapon, but he looked capable of wielding it with one hand.

He walked up, weaving slightly, to Miranda, and looked her over in a very frank fashion, then turned to Nakor and said, with a drunken slur,

"You sell her to me."

Nakor grinned. "No, I can't."

The man's eyes grew wide and he looked as if he was about to erupt into a rage as he said, "No? You say no to Fustafa!"

Nakor pointed at the building and said, "She goes there."

Instantly the man's expression changed, and he looked at Nakor and backed away. "I don't ask," he said, hurrying away.

"at was that?" asked Miranda.

"I don't know," said Nakor. He looked at the building, less than a hundred yards away. "But I think it means we need to be careful in there."

"If your husband doesn't object, I'll join you," said Nakor. "Come this way." He motioned toward an opening in the fence, between sections of the building, and they entered.

Once they had entered, Nakor saw what the structures were. A huge square had three small buildings at each corner. In the center rose six

large stones, each one carved with runes that set Miranda's teeth on edge

to view. "What is this place?" she asked.

"It's a place of summoning, a place of dark magic, a place from which something very bad will come," said Nakor.

They saw movement in the dark, in the middle of the ring of stones.

They moved forward quietly. A band of men, all wearing dark robes, stood

around a large stone. Behind the stone was a man who stood with arms outstretched, one who chanted something to the sky.

"Now we know why that man was so afraid," whispered Nakor.

"Look!"

Upon the stone lay a young woman, her eyes wide with terror, a gag in her mouth. Her hands were tied to rings of iron in the stone and she

was dressed in a short black sleeveless shift.

Nakor's eyes widened as he considered this. "We must leave!" he said urgently.

Miranda said, "We can't leave her there to die." "

Thousands will die soon if we don't leave," he whispered, holding her elbow and steering her back toward the exit.

Then there came a rumbling in the air, and Nakor said, "Run!"

Miranda didn't hesitate, and followed Nakor out the doorway. The soldiers nearby ignored the two who ran from the building, for their eyes

She flew in a straight line, up the hillside, then began a gentle turn.

When she could look down upon the building, she said, "oh, gods of mercy! v I

UP the coast, a dozen lights like the one before them had blossomed, el'il green and blue lights that filled the night with a terrible illumination.

then down the coast came a line of power, moving from each of the constructions, starting somewhere near

Miranda flew. those soldier ed nea est
A note painful to hear rang and below s camp r
the building reeled back from the sound. A faint light spread but in
a fan
from the building, toward the Kingdom camp, growing fainter as it
went.

it shifted k en then t
violet. A last deep indigo wave faded from view, and the grinding
sound
suddenly stopped.

Then, on the battlefield, the dead began to rise.

Ylith and ending below where

through the spectrum, going to red, then bac to gre , 0

Twenty-Five

MEN SCREAMED.

Erik raced from his tent, barely dressed, holding his sword. Battle-hardened
soldiers were fleeing in terror, while others struggled at the front.

if they had been infiltrated. Then he saw the man's face, and the hair on Erik's neck and arms stood up. He felt revulsion unlike anything he had known in his short life. The soldier trying to kill his former companion was dead. his lifeless eyes were still rolled up in his head and the flesh of his face was pallid and slack. But his movements were deliberate as he swung his sword. Erik jumped forward and severed the thing's head from its body with a single blow. The head rolled away, but the body kept swinging the sword. Erik hacked again and severed the creature's arm, yet the creature pressed forward.

Jadow Shati leaped past Erik and cut the creature's leg out from under it. The corpse toppled over.

"Man, they won't stop."

Erik recognized the danger. Beyond the horror of facing men already dead, which had caused one man in four to run in fear, the dead were unrelenting. They could not be stopped unless they were hacked to pieces.

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And while one was being butchered, another would strike and kill a Kingdom soldier. Then Erik saw a freshly killed Kingdom soldier rise up, his eyes rolled

shouted, "Strip the tents! Get everything that will bum and pile it on the hay. ' ~

"What hay, Captain?" asked one soldier.

"When you get back with the tents, you'll see the hay."

Erik hurried to the rear, where the engineers had been sleeping under their partially completed catapults. They were up and building on

weapons,

ready to defend their war engines if necessary. "Are any of these

finished?" asked Erik.

The Captain of Engineers, a stocky man with a grey beard, said, "This one is ready, Captain, and that other over there is just about ready to go.

What is going on?"

Erik grasped the man's arm. "Go to the front. See where our forward positions are. Return here and aim your catapult at that location."

The Captain of Engineers ran off, while Erik turned to the rest of his

crew. "How many of you will it take to finish that other catapult?"

One of the engineers said, "Just two of us, Captain. All we have to do is install the locking clamps on the arm. We could have finished last

night, but we wanted to get supper."

"Go finish it. The rest of you, come with me."

He led them to the baggage train and shouted to the soldiers guarding it, "Get to the front and hold!"

They ran off, and Erik pointed to a pair of wagons sitting on the side

of the road. He asked the engineers, "Can any of you hitch up those

horses?"

All of them answered they could, so Erik said, "Get half that oil to

Miranda said, "We must go! Pug and Tomas!"

They watched from a vantage point among the trees upon the hillside, as the Kingdom forces rallied to repulse the first wave of undead soldiers.

Then Nakor heard horns blowing at the rear of Fadawah's army. Men under arms gathered and formed up behind the struggle taking place at the diamonds. "Yes," said Nakor. "Get Pug and Tomas, and Ryana if she's there. "

Miranda vanished.

Nakor heard a trumpet sound, and the Kingdom forces at the diamonds retreated to a barrier wall that had been building rapidly behind them. They leaped over it and those who were wounded were dragged up and over it by their comrades. No man wished to die and turn against his comrades.

Then a fire was ignited and another. Suddenly the barricade was ablaze. Von Darkmoor, he thought. Young Erik was thinking fast on his feet.

The dead stumbled into the flames and noiselessly they flailed about, until they collapsed upon the ground. The few that managed to gain a purchase on the burning barriers were pushed back by spears and poles.

Then Nakor heard the sound of a war engine firing and in the darkness

he could see something flying over the camp to land near the diamonds.

A minute later another missile came flying overhead and landed closer to the barricade. Nakor could see a barrel explode upon impact, sending oil

find
the one you need to destroy."
Battle horns sounded, and Fadawah's army started to march forward
as the fires began to abate.
Tomas asked, "Where can I best serve?"
Nakor said, "Killing those soldiers here does no good, but ending the
Problem up there may save the West."

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Ryana shifted her form and suddenly the huge dragon towered over
them. "I will carry you all."
They climbed on her back and she launched herself skyward. Those
soldiers who happened to be glancing toward the treeline as Ryana
struck
a mighty beat of her wings and gained altitude were astonished, and
many
shouted and pointed, but as the battle built in fury and the
advancing
army of Fadawah bore down on the abandoned diamonds, most were too
preoccupied with survival to notice the dragon.
She circled once and headed north.

Dash heard the drums from the Keshians in the field. He knew he'd
see what they had in store later; the darkness hid the Keshians'
deployment
as sunrise was still hours off. As best the watchmen on the walls

Dash expected this meant the escaping Keshian officer Duke wrote of in his message to Patrick had successfully reached his army with the news of Krondor's weaknesses. The only good news in the message had been the fact of Jimmy being alive and Malar being dead. The word from the palace was equally mixed. Patrick, Francie, and her father would recover-though Lord Brian might have lasting effects from the poison. Lord Rufio was dead, and several of the other nobles of the area as well. Two officers had recovered enough to take up positions on the walls, but Dash knew they were woefully undermanned to hold off the Keshian army for more than a few hours, a day or two at best. There were still too many weaknesses in the defense of the city. There

were ways into the city that you didn't have to be a Mocker to find. The dry aqueduct along the north wall had more than a half-dozen entrances if one simply took the time to probe. Dash wished he could have repaired the sluice gates and flooded it, but he would have filled a hundred cellar, full of water by doing so. Suddenly an idea struck Dash. He called out,

"Gustaf.."

The mercenary appeared and said, "Sheriff?"

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the
predawn darkness.
He jumped fences and ducked under obstacles, risking injury to reach
his goal in as timely a fashion as he could. He found the door he
sought,
a root cellar entrance from all appearances, but really a cover to
one of
the Mocker-controlled tunnels leading toward their headquarters.

He hurried down stone steps, as lightly as he could while keeping up
a good rate of speed. He grabbed a stone wall corner with his left
hand,
steadying himself as he swung around.

A man turned with a startled expression on his face, and without
breaking strike, Dash hit him as hard as he could, dropping him to
the
stone floor without a sound. Dash hurried along a wide walkway which
ran above the watercourse. There was a slow trickle of water flowing
through it. Dash knew that would change if Gustaf found the oil and
used
it as directed.

Dash reached a section of wall that appeared identical to the
adjacent
sections, but which yielded to pressure, swinging open on a shaft,
perfectly
balanced so as to pivot with ease. Down a short tunnel Dash hurried,
reaching a plain door. Dash knew that here he stood the biggest risk
of
being killed before he could speak.
He tripped the locks from his side, but instead of opening the door
he

shouted, "I'm not armed! I came to talk!"

The denizens of Mother's, the headquarters for the Mockers, turned in astonishment at the sight of the Sheriff of Krondor standing before them, his sword still at his side. From across the room, Trina said, "Why, Sheriff Puppy, to what do we owe this honor?"

Looking from face to face, most of which were shifting from surprise to anger, he said, "I came to warn you."

"Of what?" said one man. "Keshians in the tunnels?"

'They're your worry, " said Dash. the ones outside the gate are mine. No. I came to warn you that in less than an hour this entire room

and the rest of Mother's is going to be under water.

,What!" shouted one man.

,it's a lie," swore another.

"No, it's not a lie," said Dash. 'I'm going to flood the north aqueduct, the culverts above the main and the bypass channel below S~ Street. These passages ,-he pointed to the door through which he had just entered and the passage beyond-, are shattered and all that water is going to come flooding down here. This entire section is going to be underwater by noon.'

Trina walked over, two very large menacing-looking men accompanying her. ,you wouldn't be saying that to flush us out, would you,

I don't need more."
,,i would believe you," said Trina, "if I didn't know the north
sluice
is damaged from the war and can't be opened until it's repaired."
'I'm not repairing it, said Dash. "I'm going to burn it."
Several men laughed. "You're going to burn a gate that's half
underwater!"
said one. "How you doing that?~f
"Quegan fire oil."
Suddenly a man said, "It burns underwaterlpy
Trina turned and shouted orders, and men began to grab packages,
bundles, and sacks. She came to stand before Dash and said, "Why warn
us?' I He grabbed her arm and looked her in the eyes. "I've grown
fond of
certain thieves over my life." He kissed her. "Call me an idiot," he
Said
after she stepped back. "BeSides, you may be a bunch of ragged good-
for
nothings, but you're my ragged good-for-nothings."
,Where should we go?" she asked, and Dash knew she wasn't
referring to the Mockers in general.
"Take the old man to Barret's Coffee House. It's almost rebuilt) and
Roo Avery already has stocked it with some food. There's a tunnel off
Of
the sewer under Prince Arutha's Way that leads to a landing by his
basement.
Lie low there."

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

She looked him in the eyes and said, "You're going to cause me more

him, but he pieced together enough of the message to know he had to get to high ground in a hurry. Dash ran along the major waterway that passed Mother's and reached a place where the culverts above had broken through. He leaped and grabbed the jagged edge of a heavy hard-clay pipe that protruded out of the wall above his head. He pulled himself up and stood on it, working his way along to a break in the wall, barely large enough to permit him entrance. He risked getting stuck as he wiggled through the break to a place where a large hole appeared above his head. He pulled himself up and stood outside in the bed of the northern watercourse. He looked around in the predawn grey and saw no one in sight. He ran toward the east.

As he reached the end of the aqueduct, he saw Gustaf and his men standing before the large wooden gate. Two men were already slamming axes into the supports on either side of the jammed gate.

Dash said, "How goes it?"

Gustaf smiled ruefully. "If those supports don't give way before we want them to and drown us all, this might work."

"How much oil did you find?"

".Several casks. I've got some of the lads pouring it into clay jugs like

You said."

Dash hurried over to the place Gustaf indicated, where two men were pouring sticky, foul-smelling napathaline from small casks into large clay jugs. "Only about a third of the way," said Dash. "And leave the stoppers

the line is going to go under the weight of the water," said Gustaf.

"Eventually, but we can't wait until the next big rain. Did you bring the rags?"

"Over there," said Gustaf, pointing to a man standing over a box up on the bank.

"Good," said Dash, hurrying over to inspect the damage. To one of the men with an ax he said, "Crack this beam here some more."

The beam was a huge one, a foot on each side, that had been stuck and held the right side of the sluice gate. The beam was between foundation stones. The man set to with his huge ax, smashing into the wood almost as hard as a rock with age. Yet each time he struck, chips flew and the wood splintered more.

Dash waved his men out of the way and indicated that the rags and what was left of the naphthaline in the casks should be brought over and

the jars should be taken to the top of the bank

The men hurried up the stone bank of the aqueduct. Dash motioned the ax-wielder aside and said,

"Get up there."

He set two casks down on the stones and picked up the third. Carefully, he laid out a long run of the rags, tied it into a knotted cord, and dribbled naphthaline on it. He then tucked one end of the rags into a cask and set a third atop the two on the bottom, forming a little pyramid right below where the beam had been chopped by the ax.

as it's
reputed to burn, it should eat
through the rest of that wood quickly.
water pressure should shove over the-"
The flame reached the casks They exploded.
The force of the blast was far more than Dash had expected, thinking
he was going to get more of a large fire. instead, men were thrown to
the
ground and two were struck by wood splinters.
Gustaf picked himself up off the ground, saying Gods. "whatat
was that? ' I

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"I'm not sure," said Dash. "My grandfather told me something about
too much air on the stuff, and I guess that's what he meant."

"Look!" said one of the constables.

The blast had cut through most of the large beam, which now was
being bent back by the gate under the pressure of millions of gallons
of
river water trapped behind it. With a loud groan the entire sluice
gate
began to move as water started to pour through several gaps in the
wood.

As the force of
the water increased, the wood started to move more rapidly
. Creaking and groaning sounds were replaced by a crack, the beam
sheared in two, and suddenly the entire gate was swept away before a
wall of water

Dash sat on the bank, watching the wall of water move down the
aqueduct. When it hit the break in the stones that would send water
pouring into the lower sewer, he could barely see a pause as the
wave swept

added, "And handle them gently." He motioned to the water surging through the destroyed sluice.

They hurried back through the city, and as they turned the corner to High Street, Dash shouted to Gustaf, "Get some barricades up here."

He then pointed back another block and said, "And there. When they break through, I want them turned before their cavalry hits the market. As soon as the gate goes, get archers up on the roofs there, there, and there." He pointed to three corners of the intersection.

Gustaf nodded. "I notice you didn't say if they break through."

"It's just a question of when, and if help can get here before they do.

I think we're in for some nasty days ahead."

Gustaf shrugged. "I'm a mercenary, Sheriff. Nasty days are what I get paid for."

Dash nodded as Gustaf hurried off to carry out his orders and the rest of the constables carried the jugs of naphthaline to the gate. He glanced around the city streets, now deserted as people hid in their houses hoping against hope that somehow they would be spared another destructive rampage such as they had endured the year before. Dash shook his head. Mercenaries, soldiers, and constables might get paid to endure such as this, but citizens didn't. They were the ones who suffered, and in his time as Sheriff he had forged a bond with the people of Krondor he couldn't

and a long sword, each holding a banner. One was the lion banner of the Empire, and the other was a house flag; Dash knew his grandfather and father would both disapprove his not recognizing it at once.

Sergeant Mackey said, "They want to talk."

Dash said, "Well, it would be rude not to listen."

Dash would be tempted to drop a jar of the naphthaline on the herald before the man was through, he thought, but each minute that passed before the attack bought them a little more time to prepare.

The herald rode before the gate and shouted, "In the name of the Empire of Great Kesh and her great General Asham ibin AI-tuk, open the

gates and surrender the city!"

Dash looked around and saw that every man on the wall was watching him. He leaned out between two merlons on the wall and shouted back, "By what right have you come to claim a city that is not yours? He glanced at Mackey and said, "Might as well go through the formalities."

"We claim these lands as ancient Keshian soil! Who speaks for the city?"

Dashel Jamison, Sheriff of Krondor!

With contempt in every word, the herald shouted, "Where is your Prince, o jailer of beggars? Hiding under his bed?"

"Still sleeping, I think," said Dash, not wishing to reveal to this man

anything about the poisoning. "If you care to wait, he may show up later

today."

"That's all right," came a voice from behind Dash.

Dash turned and saw a pale Patrick standing there, being held erect by a soldier. Patrick had donned his royal armor, golden trimmed breastplate

and open-faced helm, with a gold-trimmed purple sash of office over

gracious
Prince!" said the herald. "My ... master bids you open your gates
and withdraw. He will escort you and your retinue to your nation's
borders. '

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"Just this side of Salador," said Dash quietly.

Patrick shouted, "My nation's borders. I am standing on the wall of
the capital city of the Western Realm!"

"These lands are Ancient Kesh, and are being reclaimed."

Dash whispered, "I know we're buying time, but why bother?"

Patrick gulped for air and nodded. Then, with his last strong breath,
shouted, "Then come you on and do your worst! We reject your claim
and scorn your master."

The herald said, "Act not in haste, fair Prince. My master is kind.

He

shall make his offer three times. At sundown tonight we return to
hear

your second answer. Should you say again nay, we shall come one last
time, at dawn tomorrow. And that shall be the last of it." The herald
turned and spurred his mount forward.

Dash turned to see Patrick barely conscious, still being held up by
the

soldier. "Bravely done, fair Prince," Dash said without sarcasm. To
the

soldier he said, "Take him back to his quarters and see he rests."

Turning to Mackey, Dash said, "Get the men down from the wall

and fed. Keep a few to watch, but the Keshians will probably be as
good

as their word and not attack us until dawn tomorrow." He sat down and
suddenly felt bone-tired. "At least now we know when their spies
inside

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being an engine of death, this display is set to lure us to some sort of confrontation."

Pug, who sat directly behind Tomas, said, "I expect as mu&"

"There," said Tomas, pointing down and to the left.

Below them stretched the coastline, a southwest-facing shoreline from Quester's View to Ylith. The harbor of Ylith showed a frenzy of ships,

most of them hauling anchor and sailing out of the port.

Nakor said, "Those ships' captains didn't like what they saw last night

and are catching the morning tide out."

"Ryana," said Tomas, "down there."

He indicated the eastern gate of the city, outside of which a great building had been erected, and it was that building that was the source of

the energy which had flowed down the coast, fueling), the evil magic that

had animated the corpses.

As the dragon landed, armed men ran in all directions, uncertain of what to do. "Let me go first," said Tomas.

Pug said, "Let's not shed any blood until we have to."

Miranda said, "We will have to."

Pug said, "But until then. . ." He gestured toward the ground just before Ryana touched down. They all could see a ripple, as if water had

been troubled by a stone, causing the earth to undulate. A deep rumbling

could be heard and dust shot into the air following the course of the

Then Ryana bellowed and their ears rang, and she shot a blast of fire into the heavens, and the rest of the soldiers fled. No sane man would

face a great golden dragon.

As the four of them dismounted, Miranda said, "Thank you. That

should buy us some time.gy

Ryana said, "You are welcome." To Tomas she said, ig"en the

danger has passed, I shall leave, but until it has, call me should you need

me. I will be nearby." The dragon launched herself into the sky, and with

a powerful beat of her wings was gone, speeding to the north,

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Tomas walked purposefully toward the building. Pug, Miranda, and Nakor followed.

With the departure of the dragon, some of the bolder warriors near

the city gate ran to intercept the four. Tomas unstrapped his shield from

across his back in a movement so fluid and natural it looked impossible

to Pug. No mortal man could have duplicated the feat. His sword was out before the first warrior had closed.

The man was big and carried a large sword in two hands. He ran at Tomas shouting an inarticulate battle cry, but Tomas continued to advance

at his normal pace. The man struck a powerful blow downward

hanging poses, his back-mounted warriors.

Tomas reached the building, a thing of black stones and wooden facades.

It squatted, a terrible black sore on the landscape; there was nothing

about it pleasing to the eye or harmonious in any fashion. It reeked of evil.

Tomas walked to the large black wooden doors and paused. He drew back his right fist and struck the rightmost door. The door exploded inward,

as if there had been no hinges.

As they walked in, Nakor looked at the shattered iron hinges and said,

"Impressive. "

Miranda said, "Remind me never to get him mad."

"He's not mad," said Nakor. "Just determined. If he was mad, he'd

Pull the walls down."

The building was a giant square, with two rows of seats set hard against the walls. There were two doors: the one through which they had

entered and another opposite.

In the center of the room a square pit yawned at them, and from deep within a red glow could be seen. Above it hung a metal platform.

"Gods!" said Miranda. "What a stench."

"Look," said Nakor, indicating the floor.

Before each seat, on the floor, lay a body. They were warriors, men

With scars upon their cheeks, and each was openmouthed, their eyes

wide,

as if they had died screaming in horror.

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way up.

Tomas said, "Whatever caused that necromancy last night is down there. "

Nakor said, "NO, it is a tool. like all those dead fools."

"Where is Fadawah?" asked Miranda.

in the city, I think," said Nakor. "Probably in the Baron's citadel."

A strange keening sound echoed from deep within the pit. The hairs on Pug's neck stood up. "We can't leave this here."

Nakor said, "We can always come back."

Miranda said, "Good. Let's leave this place."

She walked to the closed door, opposite the one through which they had entered, and threw it wide.

As soon as she did, they saw the soldiers arrayed on the other side, their shields in a wall, their bows poised, and cavalry behind them.

In the moment it took for the scene to register, they heard the order given and the bowmen fired.

Dash swore. "We've got twelve, eighteen hours to ferret out the rest of the infiltrators or risk a breach."

Thomas Calhern, a squire in Duke Rufio's court, had recovered enough from the poison to serve; Dash had named him an acting Captain.

tt"at matter?" he asked. "Gods, man, you saw the army outside the gate.

Dash said, "Never been in a battle before?"

"No," said the young man, about the same age as Dash.

"If the walls are intact, those outside must bring ten men against the

wall for every one we have on top of it. We should be able to hold them

for a few days, perhaps a week, and if my brother is as clever as I know

him to be, a force from Port Vykor should arrive within days.

"But if some band of Keshian thugs gets a portal opened, and the

Dash slipped through a door and a dagger was suddenly at his throat.

"Put that away," he hissed.

"Sheriff Puppy," said a happy-sounding Trina. "I would have been very upset had I killed you."

"Not as much as I," said Dash. "How is he?"

She nodded toward the corner. A score of thieves were huddled in a far corner of the cellar. Dash smelled coffee and food. "Raided the kitchen, have we?"

Trina said, "It's a coffeehouse. We were hungry. There was food up there. What did you think?"

Dash shook his head. "I don't know what I'm thinking these days."

Trina walked with him over to where the old man lay upon a low bed, one that had been used as a stretcher to bear him to Barret's.

She whispered, "He's not doing well."

Dash knelt beside the old man, who looked at him but didn't say anything. The old man held up his hand and Dash took it. "Uncle," he said softly.

The old man gently squeezed, then let go. His one eye closed.

She leaned over, and after a moment said, "He's sleeping again.

Sometimes he speaks, other times he can't."

Dash stood up and they went to a relatively uncrowded corner of the basement, between stacks of crates. "How much time?" asked Dash.

"A few days, maybe less. When he was recovering from his burns the priest said only a great wish or the gift of a God would save him.

He's known this day was coming since then."

Dash looked at this odd woman who had come to captivate his attention. "

How many of you are left?"

She started to make a quip, then said, "I don't know. There are maybe another two hundred scattered through the city. Why?"

until dawn tomorrow to surrender, else they'll attack. We assume that means they're going to try to open one of the gates between now and then. "

"And you want us to watch the gates and let you know?"

"Something like that." He stepped closer to her, looking deep into her eyes. "You've got to slow them down."

She laughed. "You mean defend the gates until you get there."

He smiled. "Something like that," he repeated.

"I can't ask my brothers and sisters to do that. We're not warriors.

Sure, we have some bashers among the Mockers, but most of us don't

know which end of a sword is which."

"Then you better learn," said Dash.

"I can't ask them."

"No, but you can order them," said Dash slowly.

She said nothing.

Dash said, "I know the old man has been unable to run things for a while. I'll bet my inheritance you're the current Daymaster."

She remained silent.

"I won't ask anything from you without fair trade."

"What do you propose?"

"Hold the gate, whichever they attack. Defend it until I can get a flying company there, and I will pardon everyone."

"A general amnesty?"

"The same deal I made originally with the old man."

"Not enough."

"What more do you want?" asked Dash.

She pointed around the room. "Do you know how we came to be,

the Mockers of Krondor?"

Dash said, "I've heard stories since I was a boy from my grandfather about the Mockers."

"But did he ever tell you how the guild came to be?"

"No," Dash admitted.

"The first leader of the guild was called the Square Man. He was a

consolidated the Square Man's power and made the guild the place it was

when Jimmy the Hand was running roofs.

"A few Of us enjoy the dodgy path, Dash. Some Of us like breaking heads and there's no excuse for us. But most Of us just got dealt a bad

hand. Most of us have nowhere else to go."

Dash looked around the cellar. Men and women of all ages gathered there, and Dash remembered the stories his grandfather had told him of

the beggar gangs, the urchins running the streets, the girls working the taverns, and the rest of them.

"If we get amnesty, we're back on the streets the next day, and most of us are breaking laws and we're right back where we started. There was

only one Jimmy the Hand who had a prince reach down and raise him up to the heights."

Trina gripped Dash's arm. She said, "Don't you see? If Your grandfather

hadn't saved the Prince that one night long ago, he would have lived out his life with these people. It might have been him lying on that

bed over there instead of his brother. And you might be over there with

the other young men, thinking of how to survive the coming war, find a

meal, and keep out of the Sheriffs clutches instead of being the Sheriff.

"You're only a noble by a quirk of fate, Dash."

She looked into his eyes, then she kissed him, long and hard. "You've

feel
for You," she whispered. "Maybe I'm finally acting the lovestruck
girl
after all these years. Maybe in my foolish dreams I see myself living
in
Comfort as the wife of a noble. Maybe tomorrow I'll be dead.
"But if we fight for Krondor, then you must save us all. That's the
deal, not some meaningless amnesty. You must take care of the
Mockers.
That's the promise.\$\$

He looked at her for a long time, studying every detail of her face,
as
if memorizing it. Finally he said, "I promise."
She looked at him and a tear formed in each eye. As they ran down
her face, she said, "The deal is done. What do you want us to do?,,
Dash told her and they spent another moment together. Then he tore
himself away from her, the hardest thing he had ever had to do in his
life,
and he left Barret's, knowing that his life would never be the same.
be
In his heart, Dash knew that he had made a promise that would
impossible to keep. Or, if he kept it, he would be betraying his
)duty to
his office.
He tried to tell himself that the expediency of the moment required
this, that saving the city came first, and that should Krondor fall
and they
all die, the promise was nothing anyway. But deep inside, Dash knew
that he would never look at himself or any oath he gave the same way.

Horses

screamed in terror, and those that managed to land on their feet bucked

and kicked as they fled.

Pug, Tomas, Miranda, and Nakor walked through the avenue cleared by Pug's magic, past men who lay groaning upon the ground. One more hearty warrior rose to his feet, his sword in hand, and lunged toward them.

Tomas's sword snaked out of his white scabbard silently and took the man's life before he had taken a step.

They walked to the gates of Ylith.

A guard on the gate had witnessed the assault and had frantically ordered the gates closed. Men were pushing furiously on the gates as Tomas reached them. They swung ponderously toward him but he reached out, placing his shield against the left gate and his sword against

the right and with one massive push, the gates swung inward, knocking dozens of men aside.

Nakor said, "I wish he'd left Elvandar earlier."

Pug nodded. "But a vow is a vow. He couldn't see the threat to his home until now."

Miranda said, "Having power doesn't free one from being shortsighted."

"

Not short-sighted," said Pug. "Just a different appreciation of the Situation. "

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,,Where to now?" asked Miranda.

windows

shattered, looking like nothing so much as empty faces.

Men ran from the sight of the four people encompassed by a sphere of flickering blue energy. From nearby alleys and streets, archers peered

out and fired arrows at them; they bounced harmlessly off the magic shell.

They reached the corner where they needed to turn and found another company of archers waiting. Dozens of arrows struck the barrier and bounced off, and when Tomas reached a position a dozen feet before the

first rank of archers, they broke and ran.

Nakor said, "These men are not dangerous to us as long as we pay attention to them, but

OUS.))

"Do you know this as a fact," asked Tomas, "or are you conjecturing?"

"

Conjecturing," said Nakor.

"But you suspect something," said Miranda.

"what?" asked Pug.

"Nothing I care to

somewhere ahead is someone who is very danger

talk about yet," said Nakor. "But yes, I have a

suspicion."

"I've learned over the years to take those seriously," said Pug.

"What

do you suggest?"

They were nearing a large intersection where soldiers were rolling wagons across the street in a barricade. Nakor said, "Only to be careful."

points of light spanned across your eyes." Pug warned.

Abruptly the scene became a harsh contrast in white and black, as the

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point of light erupted to the brilliance of the sun at noon, then brighter.

The pulse of light lasted only for a moment, but the effect was literally blinding.

Pug and his companions opened their eyes to see men crying in panic and terror, some reaching around, while others fell to their knees, their hands to their eyes.

"I'm blind!" was repeated on all sides by panic-stricken men. Tomas walked through a gap between two wagons, the defense of the city forgotten

by men made blind. "How long will it last?" asked Miranda.

"No more than a day for some, hours for others," said Pug. "But this particular group will not be any further trouble to us."

They made their way around the last of the barriers and moved up the street toward the citadel. The remaining soldiers who had retained

their sight ran at the vision of the four powerful beings walking purposefully down the street.

A panic-stricken sentry had called for the drawbridge to be raised, and

as they came within a hundred yards of the bridge, they saw it starting to

rise. Tomas broke into an effortless run, his sword drawn, and Pug realized

he had left the containment of the defensive shell. Pug let it lapse,

The soldiers inside the citadel cut the restraining ropes on the winch that raised the portcullis, and the heavy iron gate slid down before them, the iron points slamming into the stones with a loud crash. "I can raise it and You can all slip under," said Tomas. Miranda said, "No, let me." She waved her hands in a series of gestures and raised her right palm, then extended her right arm toward the gate. A ball of scintillating white-and-silver light formed around her hand, then flew off, like a ball lazily tossed by a child, arching gracefully to Strike the center of the portcullis. The energy ran along the bars, sparking and sizzling, and the iron in the gate began to smoke. Then it heated up, turning first red, then white-hot. Even standing yards away, they could feel the scorching heat of the metal as it began to melt and crumble before them. The men in the gatehouse above the portcullis began to shout and flee the structure, due to the tremendous heat rising from the burning gate. Where the molten metal struck the wood of the gate, it flamed and smoke rose. in minutes a hole more than adequate to allow them to pass had been melted through the gate. "Watch where you step, Nakor," said Miranda. "You watch, too," said Nakor. "I'm not the one wearing sandals," she said.

to protect the city from goblins and Brothers of the Dark Path from
the
Northlands, raiding down into Yabon. Here, for five generations, the
business
of the Barony had been conducted.
They walked up a broad set of steps to a daunting set of oak doors.
Tomas pushed them open, and they parted with a shattering crack as a
bar the size of a man's arm behind the doors splintered and broke.
Before they crossed the threshold, Nakor said, "Ware this place. It
is
a seat of power."
Tomas said, "I can feel it. It has an alien feeling, something no
Valheru
has encountered."
Pug said, "That's saying something. If a Dragon Lord hasn't
encountered
what's on the other side of that door. . . ." He closed his eyes and
sent out his senses. At the portal a ward existed; had they passed
through
without protection, they would have been incinerated. Pug quickly
ascertained
the nature of the ward and countered it. "It's safe to pass," he
said.
Sword at the ready and shield before him, Tomas entered the room
first. Pug followed with Miranda and Nakor.
As soon as they entered the old baronial great hall, it was as if
they
had stepped into another world. The hall reeked of death and the
floors
were stained with blood. Skulls and bones were scattered around the
room, and a faint haze darkened the air. Torches burned in sconces,
their

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thing. The great vaulted windows of the room had been painted in red and black, passing only the faintest illumination from outside. The runes upon them were alien and repugnant to view.

Nakor glanced from window to window. "These are wrong," he whispered.

"What do you mean?" asked Miranda.

"Whoever painted those is trying to do something very ... very bad. But they didn't do it ... correctly. "

"How do you know?" asked Tomas, holding his sword ready and watching first one side then the other as he advanced slowly up the center of the room.

"Years of sleeping on the Codex of Wodar-Hospur ... I remember things when I need to know them. If I thought about that too much, it might make me upset."

As they crossed the hall, they confronted a figure on the right-hand side of the baronial throne that caused them all to pause. It was clearly not human. It looked roughly human, though its skin had a pale blue tinge. Upon its back large wings with brilliant white feathers sprouted. On

the left-hand side of the throne stood a man, dressed in black robes with

runes embroidered upon them. He had a silver collar around his neck. Sitting on the throne was an old warrior, still strong-looking despite his age. His grey-shot hair was cut short, though he retained the long fall

Fadawah's eyes drifted to Tomas, and he said, "What is that?"

Tomas said, "I am Tomas, Warleader of Elvandar."

The being to Fadawah's left smiled. His features were cruel and evil, despite being stunningly beautiful, and twice as terrifying for that beauty:

a high brow framed in golden ringlets, a straight regal nose. The mouth

was full, sensual, and the eyes were a pale blue. His body looked powerful,

heavily muscled, and there was an aura of danger about him even as he sat motionless.

He spoke and the room rang with despair upon every word. "The

stepped forward and said, "Stand aside,

your Majesty!" he said. The creature

your Majesty."

Fadawah stood up and moved 'behind the Other nun' who silently watched the exchange. The entity was his equal in stature.

Crossing to stand before Tomas,

The creature's voice boomed out in laughter. "Long have I ached to see your faces

one of the Dragon Hosts, he said. Suddenly he lashed out with his bare

the

fist, striking Tomas's shield. Tomas flew back across the room and

dozens of guards who had stood motionless erupted into action,

Miranda reacted before either Nakor or Pug. She spun full circle, her

hand held palm downward, and spoke a word of power

a diamond of energy flew from her hand, shrieking through the air to strike the wall

came from both his hands, invisible but Parting the air like a
thousand
fists. The winged creature was physically picked up and slammed back
into the throne. Fadawah and the man with the silver collar both
jumped
away, to avoid being struck by the ~g's wing.
Nakor ran forward, as if to attack, but rather than strike with his
staff,
he confronted the being. "What are You?)' he demanded.
Nakor aside, as if he was
Laughing as it stood, the creature pushed
too trivial a being to warrant violence. "I am the One Who Was
Called'
,,Who are you?~ Nakor repeated, sitting on the floor.
Leaning over, his beautiful face mere inches from Nakor, he said, "I
am Zaltais of the Eternal Despair."
I You must vanquish him."
Nakor shouted, "Tomas.
With a gesture of his finger, Zaltais seemed to lift Nakor up and
propel
him in an arc across the hall, letting the old Isalani gambler slam
into the
wall. Nakor slumped to the floor.
Tomas lay below the flashing Mystic blade that Miranda had cast, as
it rebounded from wall to wall, carving through those warriors still
standing.
Pug held his hand palm-Out toward Zaltais, and an explosion of energy
slammed into the winged being, propelling him backward into the
throne one more time.
The mystic weapon that Miranda had cast faded suddenly, and Tomas
leaped to his feet. The dozen remaining warriors surrounded him, and
he
struck out with his sword. Possessed by senses beyond human, he moved

addressed you, Pug, or Syde, member of the Assembly.
You are no Macros the Black, but you are a power! Too bad you're not
worthy of your mentor's legacy."
Pug faltered a moment, suddenly unsure of his next act. That
hesitation
cost him as Zaltais flicked his hand and sent coils of black energy
snaking toward Pug. They struck, and each time they hit, Pug felt
pain
unlike any he had known; beyond the pain of flesh ripped by cruel
fangs,
each bite made him doubt his own ability. He hesitated, '^ then fell
back.
"Pug," shouted Miranda, seeing her husband retreating.
Tomas swung his golden sword and killed the last of the warriors as
Nakor started to rouse.
As Pug fell back, Tomas leaped past him, and the golden sword swung
down. Zaltais raised his arm, taking Tomas's blade on a golden bracer
upon his wrist. The blade showered golden sparks and Tomas
overbalanced,
leaving himself open to a blow from the winged creature. Zaltais
leveled a backhand strike with his right fist, slamming into Tomas's
face,
and the warrior in white-and-gold staggered from the blow.
I In thirty years Tomas had never faced a creature of this power. Not
since facing the combined mind of the Valheru had Tomas known such
doubt. Even the demon Jakan seemed a trivial test compared to this
creature.

Tomas fell to the floor and tasted blood on his lips. "What are you?"
"I?" said Zaltais. "I am an Angel of the Seventh Circle! I am an
agent
Of the Gods!"
Nakor stood up and said, "Get back! He is not what he seems' He is

to serve him.

Tomas rose up, the blood from his lip dripping onto his breastplate, where it ran off, without stain. "I will never serve this creature," he said.

"First he'll make you doubt your ability. Then he will make you doubt your purpose. Then he'll make you doubt your place in the universe. Then

he'll convince you where that place is!"

The self-proclaimed Angel from Hell said, "You talk too much, old man!" He withdrew the black coils that had struck Pug and pointed his hand at Nakor. A blinding flash of white-hot energy flared, and Nakor leaped aside as it shot across the hall. It shot out the doorway as Miranda

also leaped aside.

Tomas jumped to his feet, drawing back his sword, and struck down at the crown of the creature's head. Zaltais pulled away, so the tip of the blade struck him in the face. He reeled back, screaming in rage and pain.

A red gash cut him from crown to chin. As if the muscles below his skin were pushing outward, the crack down his face widened, then split, running down his throat to his chest and stomach, and he shrieked, an inhuman sound.

It was a keening sound, and it made Pug's teeth ache as if they were being ground together. Pug saw the red gash splitting Zaltais from crown to groin. Like a pea pod being cracked open, Zaltais's skin and wings fell away.

The thing that emerged from within that shell looked like a giant praying mantis, with a black chitinous exterior, and large diaphanous wings.

back as Miranda came forward incanting a spell. Pug also was attempting a spell. Nakor hurried around the confrontation now in the center of the room. He didn't want to get in the way. He looked over to where General Fadawah stood, his own sword at the ready as if he sought to join in the

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fight on the side of his infernal servant. The other man crouched down beside the throne and Nakor approached them, his staff ready if he needed to defend himself. Miranda and Pug's spells were completed within seconds of one another. Crimson bands materialized around the insect and clamped down hard upon it. It chittered in rage and pain. Then Pug's spell manifested, a nimbus of white light which caused Zaltais to go limp. It crashed to the stones. "Quickly!" shouted Nakor. "Take it back to the pit and cast it in. Then seal the pit." "How?" asked Miranda. "Any way you can think of." Turning to face Fadawah and his companion, Nakor said, "I'll take care of these two." Tomas picked up the imprisoned creature, while Pug cast a backward glance at Nakor. Miranda said, "Go, now!" Nakor advanced on Fadawah, his staff before him, while the General

shot forward, the butt striking Fadawah's sword hand with a
knucklecrushing
blow. The sword fell from fingers gone numb and the General
fell back, knocking over Kahil.
Fadawah tried to pull out a belt dagger with his left hand, but Nakor
smashed it with his staff, and the General cried out in pain, as he
now
held out two useless hands.
Nakor's staff shot out a third time, and the General's kneecap
shattered.
He fell, crying in agony as Nakor said, "For too many crimes to
measure, beyond what the Emerald Queen and the demon Jakan forced
You to do, you have earned death. I shall be merciful and spare you
the
suffering you deserve." Suddenly the staff shot forward again,
striking
the now helpless Fadawah in the center of his forehead. Nakor heard
the man's skull crack. The self-styled King of the Bitter Sea's eyes
rolled
up into his head and he died.
Nakor moved around Fadawah's body and knelt next to the man who
crouched next to the throne. He was a thin man, his cheekbones the
most
prominent feature of his face. "Hello, my love," said Nakor.
"You recognize me?" he whispered.
"Always," said Nakor. "Who are you in this body?"
"I am Kahil, Captain of Intelligence."
"The power behind the throne, eh?" said Nakor. "So this is where
you went when the demon took your place?"
"No, before," said Kahil. "I sensed something wrong with that body
when I wore the Emerald Crown. My powers were being subverted ...
in any event, Kahil had been with Fadawah before and was trusted. He

her bed and helped Kahil to his feet. "Mad. His mind was totally gone. I thought to build a weapon, an engine of magic that would create an army of the dead-there were so many of them lying around-and it did that, but it also brought Zaltais out of the pit. I did not expect that. Fadawah could control it, at least for a while, and I could not. I was, I believe the expression is, 'caught between a rock and a hard place.' I was ready to dispose of Fadawah once the Kingdom was defeated and I held all of Yabon, but with Zaltais around, I couldn't quite get to that point."

"You always failed to anticipate consequences, Jorma."

"Kahil, please."

"How do you like being a man this time?"

"It's occasionally useful. But I miss my last body. It was by far the most beautiful." Looking at Nakor, the being who had once been

Nakor's

wife, the Lady Clovis, and the Emerald Queen said, "You've used that body for a very long time now."

"I like it," said Nakor. "It was the one I was born with. I just change

my name every once in awhile." He pointed to the door through which his companions left. "Did you see your daughter?"

"That was Miranda?" said Kahil. "My gods!"

Nakor grinned. "The other was her husband."

"Do I have grandchildren?"

"Not yet." Nakor lost his smile. "You know, you've gone so far down

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an evil road I barely remember what it was you once were. A vain girl,

he has in store for a failed minion. You know what I have to do?"

"I know what you must try to do," said Kahil, stepping back.

"Your vanity almost brought this world to ruination. Your lust for external youth and beauty caused you to destroy nations. You cannot be

allowed to continue."

"So at last you will attempt to kill me? It will take more than a tap to this head to rid this universe of me."

"No, I will kill you."

Kahil started to incant a spell, but before he could finish it, Nakor struck him in the face with the butt of his staff. The former Emerald Queen, now in a man's body, staggered backward, his concentration broken

and his spell incomplete. Nakor leveled his staff and a burst of white

light shone on Kahil. He froze, transfixed, and from his mouth a mournful

sound emerged. It grew weaker by the second as the body faded, becoming

pale, then translucent, then transparent. When it vanished from view, the

sound ceased, and Kahil was absent from the room. Sadly Nakor said, "I

should have done that a century ago, but then I didn't know how."

He indulged himself a moment to reflect on everything, then he turned and hurried to overtake the others. Until Zalta's was returned to the

pit

and it sealed after him, the struggle was not over.

Miranda waved her hand and a brilliant shower of sparks exploded from her palm and sprayed a dozen soldiers hanging back near the gates

spell is falling.

Suddenly the crimson bands shattered, flung in all directions, the pieces fading from sight. The insectlike creature bounded upright and

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lashed out with a razor-sharp forearm. Tomas took the blow on his sword

and the sound of the clash was steel upon steel.

Bright orange light bathed Zaltais as it pulled back to strike again.

"It's casting a spell!" Miranda shouted.

Pug incanted a word of power, which should have given him the ability to sense the monster's magic. Instead he felt a blinding stab of pain

in his head and he fell to his knees.

Pug's hands went to his head and tears ran down his face as he struggled

to make himself breathe. The images and sensations that flooded his mind were so alien as to cause nothing but pain. The spell he had utilized

was designed to sense out the nature of the spell being used, and to counteract

it if possible, but even the emanations of the Dread Lord that appeared

under Sethanon, and of the Demon Kings, Jakan and Maarg, were comparatively familiar compared to what he was experiencing now. Pug fell to his knees, his eyes squeezed shut and his fists at his temples.

Miranda took a more direct approach and simply tried to bum the

monster was swollen and cooking in its own juices, the carcass cracked in several places. Tomas grabbed one of the forearms and tried dragging it. He made slow progress, but Zaltais was hauled through the large doors of the building and toward the pit. Then, with a loud crack, the chitinous outer shell broke, and inside the body they could see something writhing. The shell parted and something

akin to a giant white worm began to wiggle out.

Miranda said, "I don't have the strength to burn it again.

Nakor said "You don't need to burn it. Get it into the pit!"

Tomas charged the creature as it was halfway out of the smoking insect shell. He bashed it as hard as he could with his shield, and Zaltais

was knocked backward, dragging the insect carcass with him, its lower section still embedded in the shell.

The thing shrieked, a sound which cut through the skull like a knife, causing Tornas to falter, but he overcame the sound and smashed the

creature again, knocking it back once more, now only a dozen feet from the yawning opening of the pit.

Zaltais frantically snapped his tail, trying to rid himself of the insect corpse. Tomas kicked the thorax section and it spun the creature around,

the insect body sliding toward the pit.

Pug wiped his hand across his eyes, his ringing head now clearing, and he uttered a simple spell that threw a punch of air, but one which could crush a man's ribs. The creature was knocked backward and suddenly

as if
it was the only thing keeping him alive.
Then the sound was gone. Nakor said, "We must seal this pit!"
"How?" asked Pug. "I've never seen anything like this."
"Yes, you have," said Nakor. "You're just not recognizing it!"
Pug took a deep breath and used what little energy he had left to
assess the pit. "It's a rift!" he said at last.
"Yes," said Nakor, "but not the sort you know."
"How did you know?" asked Miranda.

"I'll explain it all later," said Nakor, "but you must close it."
A faint breeze stirred, and Miranda said, "Did you feel that?"
"Yes," said Tomas. "And I don't usually feel the wind inside a build
"
There's something trying to come through!" shouted Nakor.

Pug said, "I need help!"
"What do we do?" asked Miranda.
"Give me whatever strength you can!" shouted Pug. He closed his
eyes and let his mind enter the rift. He sensed the energies and was
again
assaulted by an overwhelming sense of alien wrongness. Yet there was
a
Pattern, and as alien as it was, once he apprehended it, he was able
to
study it, and with study, the structure began to emerge. "I have it!"
he
said at last.

He let his mind call up the knowledge he had gained as a Great One
On Kelewan, as he had studied rifts and their nature. The nature of
the
rift was that Pug could either use more power to close it than it
took to

understanding. A part of Pug's mind recoiled and wanted nothing more than to fall to the floor and whimper, as Fadawah had done. But Pug's mental discipline came to the fore and he held his ground against this horror of the mind.

Whatever it was, it quested. It knew Pug was somewhere close by, but not quite where. Pug felt a sense of urgency rise up inside as he sought

to unweave the matrix of power that held open the rift, for he knew that

should this being find him, he would be lost forever.

A faint surge of power came to Pug and he knew that Miranda had succeeded in joining her power to his. He felt a sense of reassurance from

her when she touched him, and the part of his mind able to perceive her

sent forth its thanks.

The questing consciousness on the other side of the rift was becoming more aware of Pug as each second passed. Pug had his own spell ready.

He opened his eyes and for a moment it was if he was seeing two images at once. Before him stood Tomas, sword at the ready, with Miranda

and Nakor beside him. Overlaying that image was one of a torn section of space and time, through which a great terror was peering in his

direction. More than anything else, Pug was struck by the image of a vast

eye peering through a keyhole.

Pug yanked back his own line of power, disrupting the supporting matrix of energy. He sensed a terrible rage from the other side of the rift.

"Get out!" he shouted, and as he turned to run he realized he could

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the building began to shudder and shake. A crack of timber heralded the roof shattering, collapsing into the building.

Miranda said, "Everything's being sucked into the rift!"

Pug said, "I hope not everything."

Nakor said, "It will balance out, but there will be a very big hole in the ground to fill when it's done."

A thunderous rumble sounded, and as Nakor predicted, a huge hole in the ground appeared and the rest of the building fell into it. A giant cloud of dust shot heavenward, and more ground fell into the hole. Then

the rumbling stopped.

"It is over?" asked Miranda.

Pug closed his eyes and rested his head upon Tomas's back. "It will never be over," he said.

A ragged boy ducked under the outstretched arms of a guard who shouted, "Hey!"

"I gotta talk ta the Sheriff." he shouted as he dodged by.

Dash turned to see the youngster scampering up the stairs. He stood on the rampart over the city gates, watching the Keshians deploy in the predawn darkness. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"Trina says to tell you, the South Palace Gate! Now!"

Instantly Dash knew he had overlooked other agents *inside the palace.

ould be in the wrong place.

Dash shouted to Gustaf, "South Palace Gate!"

Gustaf had a flying company, a company ready to run to any point in the line and reinforce, and they were off as soon as Dash shouted the location.

Turning to an officer nearby, Dash said, "Keep things here under control. Until their agents report the gate open, they'll go through the

charade of asking for surrender one more time."

Dash hurried down the stairs and chased after Gustaf and his men.

he ran through the streets until he could hear the sound of fighting.

"Where is the palace guard?" he demanded.

Gustaf said, "They were ordered up to support the main gate."

"Who gave that order?" asked Dash.

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"I thought you did," replied the constable.

"When we find out who gave that order, we'll have found our poisoner.

Dash and his constables raced through the street to the north-most entrance to the palace and found the gate unattended. He motioned for the men to run to the left, around the stables, and into the

marshaling

yard from the north. At the far end of the marshaling yard he saw a brawl

taking place in front of the south gate. He had ridden wagons through that gate when working for Roo Avery what seemed like years before,

in

The mercenaries at the gate were quickly disposing of the thieves,
and

Dash tried to will himself to be faster. He was twenty yards away
when

he saw a burly man with a beard strike down a young thief-barely more
than a boy-then turn to join his companion facing Trina.

The first man before her struck an overhand blow, which she blocked
high, leaving her guard open. The burly man stepped under and drove
the point of his sword into her stomach.

"No!" Dash cried as he ran right into the two men without slackening
speed. He carried both of them away and down in a heap. He struck out
with his sword, killing the bigger man as he lay on the ground, then
rolled

over to come to his feet facing the first man who had struck at
Trina.

The man made a combination attack, feigning a head blow, then turning
his wrist to slash at Dash's side. Dash nimbly stepped back, then
forward, while the man's sword point was moving past him and, before
he could reverse his blade's direction, Dash killed the man with a
stabbing
blow to the throat.

The constables overwhelmed the attackers at the gate as the thieves
began to carry away their wounded. The Keshian agents fought to the
last, but eventually they were all killed or disarmed.

Dash looked around, and when he saw everything was under control,
he ran over to where Trina lay. The gate was still closed.

He knelt and cradled her in his arms and saw her skin was pallid
d and

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clammy. Blood flowed copiously from her stomach and Dash knew her

... said, "We have work to do, Sheriff." "We have work to do, Sheriff." Dash said, "We have work to do, Sheriff." Dash looked upward and saw the sky was brightening. He knew circumstances demanded he put aside his personal grief and the numbing sense of loss he felt. Soon the Keshian herald would approach the gate and make his final demand for surrender-for when the Keshian army saw the southern gate wasn't open, they would know their only option was to attack, and they would come.

Twenty-seven

T HE HORSES PANTED.

Riders urged them on and prayed their mounts would hold out for one more day. Jimmy had put them on a punishing regimen, from dawn to dusk, with the shortest breaks possible. The horses were all exhibiting the results of the forced march, ribs beginning to show where not so many days before they had been sleek and comfortably fat. Six horses had come up lame, and those riders had been forced to drop out, walking their animals back to Port Vykor or following after, hoping there would be a Kingdom army waiting when they at last got there. Two animals had been so badly injured they had been put down. The troop was within minutes of being in sight of Krondor, and Jimmy prayed again that he was wrong in his surmise, and they would find the city peacefully going about its business. He would gladly accept the years of jests and taunts he would endure as a result should that be the case, but he knew in the pit of his stomach he was about to run

Keshian herald had seen. First in his concept, a quality Dash would have found more admirable had he not been in a nearly murderous rage over Trina's death. It had taken all the self-control he could manage to not grab a bow and take the herald out of his saddle when he came for the third time, demanding the surrender of the city. Patrick was back in his castle, under guard against another attack by agents of Kesh. Dash put aside the sinking feeling in his stomach that, if they should somehow survive the assault on the city, it would be a search of tedious proportions to uncover all the agents of Kesh. Trumpets sounded and war horns blew, and the Keshian infantry marched forward. In files of ten men, they carried ladders. Dash could hardly believe they'd assault first with scaling ladders, without heavy machines or a turtle to protect the men. Then a hundred bowmen rode into view, and Dash called out, "Get ready to duck!" A horn sounded and the men with the ladders broke into a run, while the horse archers spurred their mounts forward, between them. The horsemen unleashed a barrage of arrows, and Dash hoped all his men had heard the warning to duck. A clattering of arrows against stones and shields and the absence of more than a few oaths and screams told him most had understood. Then his own bowmen rose up and delivered a withering fire down on those below the wall. Dash crouched down behind a merlon and said, "Pass the word: target those with the ladders. Worry about the archers later." The soldiers on both sides passed the word, and Krondorian archers

and told us you'd killed every man to the gate.

"Where is he?"

"Dead," said the guardsman. "He was one of those trying to seize the South Palace Gate, and he died during the fighting."

Dash nodded, making a mental note to make sure no palace servant or functionary stayed in place without a thorough investigation. The period

when the Prince had resided in Darkmoor and Dash had overseen the transition from Duko's rule to Patrick's return had been too lax. Malarl~

and other agents had easily insinuated themselves into the palace.

Which also meant Kesh had plans for this offensive long before the truce at Darkmoor last year.

Dash kept his rage bottled up, his frustration and anger at Trina's death and the assault on the city. He vowed that should Keshians come over the wall, he would personally kill more of the enemy than any man

defending the city.

And should the city endure, he would see that his promise to Trina was not made in vain.

They landed in a clearing a few miles from the city. Pug staggered as he got off the dragon's back and sat down on the grass.

Miranda sat next to her husband and said, "Are you all right?"

Pug said, "My mind is still swimming."

Tomas said, "'where to next?"

"Many places," said Nakor. "And not all of us together." To Tomas

he said, "Why don't you have your friend fly you home to your wife?

There is still much work to be done, but you can return home knowing you've saved Elvandar and its inhabitants from problems for the near future."

"I would like to hear a few things first," said Tomas.

"Yes," said Miranda. "What was that creature?"

"I have no knowledge of anything like him," said Tomas. "And the

... what about Zaltais, and how long ago.

"What about Zaltais?" asked Pug.

"Fadawah was lured to practicing dark magic by his advisor, Kahil," Nakor said. "I think Kahil has been behind everything that went on in Novindus from the start. He was a dupe, a tool of the Pantathians, who somehow managed a degree of freedom, and he used that to create a position for himself, one where he could manipulate others ... P' He hesitated,

then continued, "The same way Jorma became Lady Clovis and controlled the Overlord and Dahakon years ago. Kahil was at Fadawah's side from the start. He avoided destruction and continued to advise and ... well, I suspect he convinced Fadawah to turn to the very powers that destroyed the Emerald Queen and the Demon King. He served that power

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we do not speak of, and like most of the Nameless One's minions, he did not even know who he served ... he was just driven."

"Zaltais?" prodded Miranda. "What did you mean when you said he wasn't a creature?"

"He was not of this reality, more so than the demons or even the dread. He was a thing from the Seventh Circle of Hell."

"But what was he?" asked Pug.

"He was a thought, probably a dream."

"A thought?" asked Tomas.

Pug said, "And when I looked into the rift?"

"You saw the mind of a God."

"I don't understand," said Pug.

Nakor patted him on the shoulder. "You will in a few hundred years.

Tomas touched his lip. His dream seemed concrete enough to me.

"oh," said Nakor, "a God's dream is reality."

Pug said, "We should go."

"Where?" asked Miranda. "Back to the island?"

"No," said Nakor. "We should tell the Prince the leadership of the

enemy is dead."

"Kronдор, then," said Pug.

"One thing, though," said Miranda.

"What?" asked Nakor.

",You mentioned some time ago that the demon Jakan replaced

Mother at the head of that army, but you never said anything about

what

happened to her."

Nakor said, "Your mother is dead."

"Are you certain?" asked Miranda.

Nakor nodded. "Very certain."

Pug stood up, still feeling shaky. Tomas said, "Ryana will bear me

back to Elvandar."

Pug embraced his old friend and said, "Again, we say good-bye.

"And we'll meet again," answered Tomas.

"Fare you well, old friend," said Pug.

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"And you three as well," said Tomas.

He climbed aboard the dragon's back and she leaped into the sky.

Two beats of her wings and she banked off to the west and started on

the

journey back to Elvandar.

Pug said, "Are you up to getting us all to Kronдор?"

Miranda said, "I can manage." She took them both by the hands and

closed her eyes, and reality swam around them.

They appeared in the great hall of the Prince's palace in Kronдор as

with guide ropes, and as they reached the last stretch of road before the gate, they released the ropes and veered off. The ram picked up speed and the rumbling grew louder as the ram closed to within fifty yards of the gate. As it bore down, Dash reflexively gripped the stones of the wall as he anticipated the impact. Then someone shoved between Gustaf and Dash and stuck his hand over the wall. A sheet of light extended from the man's hand, and Dash turned to see his great-grandfather standing next to him. "Enough!" Pug shouted, his anger clearly evident on his face as the ram exploded into a thousand flaming splinters. Whatever the Keshians expected, this display of magic wasn't it. Their attack, timed to coincide with the ram smashing the gate, faltered as men on horseback were suddenly greeted by the sight of a very high wall surmounted by archers instead of an open gate for them to charge through. They pulled up and milled around in confusion, as the defenders or the wall unleashed a barrage of arrows. Pug shouted, "No!" and with a wave of his hands sent out a curtain of heat that turned the arrows into flaming cinders that fell far short of their mark. Turning to Dash, he said, "I don't see any other officers. Are you in charge here?" Dash said, "For the moment." "Then order your men to stop shooting." Dash did so, and the Keshians retreated to their lines unharmed. Pug

SHAP,DS OF A BPOKEN CROWN

A pale and weak-looking Patrick stood before his throne as General II Asharn ibin AI-tuk marched into the throne room, flanked by a guard and

a servant. He bowed perfunctorily. "I am here, Highness."

Patrick said, "I did not call this meeting."

Pug stepped forward and said, "I did."

"And you are?" asked the General.

"I am called Pug."

The General raised an eyebrow in recognition. "The magician at Stardock. '

'The same.

"Why have you summoned me?"

"TO tell you to take your army and go home."

The General said, "If you think that display outside the gate will turn

my attention-')

A guard ran in and said, "Highness, fighting has erupted!"

the General said, "I am under a flag of truce!"

Patrick asked the guard, "Where is the fighting?"

"Outside the wall! It appears as if cavalry from both the north and south has attacked the Keshians.

Patrick said, "General, those are units not presently under my command.

They are obviously riding to relieve Krondor and do not know of the truce. You are free to rejoin your men."

The General bowed and turned to leave, but Pug said, "No!"

Pugens were able to see the rear of the Keshian position and that a lot of horse was attacking along the coast road from the east. I_Tpan

V-Cshians between two attacking columns. no caite ng
Pug hovered a hundred feet above the battle and clapped his hands together, and a peal of thunder struck those below, knocking some of the

riders directly underneath him out of their saddles.

Men looked up and saw a man floating in the air, and from the t man a brilliant light erupted, a golden glow that was as bright as the sun. His

voice carried to every man as if he were standing next to them: "This ends now!"

With a wave of his hand he sent a force through the air, a ripple which visibly distorted the air. The wave hit horses and knocked them down, throwing more men to the ground.

Men turned and ran.

Jimmy sat firm on a bucking, frantic horse, trying to bring the animal

under control. After two more kicks, the animal set out at a run, and Jimmy let it, turning it and then bringing it to a halt. He turned the animal

around and saw more animals running in every direction as Keshians raced back toward their burning wagons.

Then he glanced up to where Pug hung in the air and again came

Pug's voice: "This ends now."

Then Pug vanished.

Nakor said, "Well, at least you got them to stop fighting for a while."

The three of them sat in an abandoned room in the palace, after the Prince

had retired and the Keshian General returned to his army.

Iti will get them to stop for good," said Pug.

armies,
I'll do it."
Nakor said, "You'll think of something. When the Prince and the
General have time to calm down, you can tell them what you want. yv
"When are you meeting again?" asked Miranda.
, 'Tomorrow at noon.'
"Good," said Nakor. "That gives me time to see if what I think has
happened has happened."
"You're being cryptic again," said Miranda.
Nakor smiled. "Come along and see. We'll get something to eat.

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He led them out of the room, then out of the palace, past guards who
stood an uneasy watch knowing they might have to return to the walls
and a terrible fight at a moment's notice.
As they left the palace, they saw horsemen riding into the marshaling
yard through the southern gate. At their head Pug saw his other
great-grandson
and waved.
Jimmy rode over and said, "I saw that display, Pug." He grinned and
Pug's heart squeezed slightly when for a second he saw Gamina's smile
echoed in it. "You saved a lot of my men's lives. Thank you."
Pug said, "I'm pleased you were among those who benefited."
"Is Dash ... ?"
"He's inside, alive, and until Patrick regains his strength, in
command
of the city."
Jimmy laughed. "Somehow I don't think he enjoys that very much."
"Go see him," said Pug. "We're going to Nakor's temple and will be
back in the morning. We have a general meeting at noon to end this
nonsense. "

Ya in the morning.

Nakor said, "Let's go. I want to see what's happened."

They hurried through a city cautiously returning to normal activities as people ventured out of their houses. With so few people about, they

reached the Temple Quarter of the city quickly.

No one was visible outside the tent, but once they stepped through, they saw a crowd sitting on the floor. In the center of the room the woman

Aleta sat on the floor, rather than floating in the air, and the light about

her was gone. So was the illaspectedd darkness which had hovered in the

air beneath her.

Dominic hurried over and said, "Nakor! I am glad to see you."

"When did this happen?" asked Nakor.

"A few hours ago. One moment she was floating in the air, and the next the blackness below her vanished, as if it had been sucked down through a hole, and she gently floated back to the ground, opened her eyes, and began speaking."

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Pug and the others turned their attention to what the woman was saying, and instantly Nakor said, "Her voice, it's different."

Pug had no knowledge of what the young woman had sounded like before, but he knew it could be nothing like what he heard now, for her

voice was magical. It was soft, and yet easy to hear if one but took a

moment to listen: a musical voice.

"What's she saying." asked Miranda.

"She's been talking about the nature of good since she awoke," said

Dominic. He looked at Nakor. "When you first began this temple, and

"Has anyone written down what she's said?"

Sho Pi was sitting to one side and said, "I have had two acolytes recording her words, Master Nakor. This is the beginning of her third iteration of the same lesson she taught."

"Good, because I'll bet she's getting hungry and tired." He put his hand on her shoulder and she faltered in her speech.

She blinked and her eyes seemed to change focus, and she looked at Nakor and said, "What?" Her voice was different, what one might expect

of a mortal woman of her age, without the magic that had made it soothing and wonderful a moment earlier.

"You've been asleep," said Nakor. "why don't you get something to eat? We'll talk later."

The girl got up and said, "oh, I'm stiff. I must have been sitting like that a while."

Nakor said, "A couple of weeks, actually."

"Weeks!" Aleta said. "You can't be serious."

"I'll explain everything to you later. Now go get some food and then a long nap.) ~

After she left, Dominic said, "If she's not an avatar, what is she?"

Nakor grinned. "She is a dream." He looked at Pug and Miranda, and said, "A wonderful dream."

Miranda said, "But Nakor, she's still here. Zaltais is gone."

Nakor nodded. "He was a thing of the mind from that other world, projected into this. Aleta is a normal woman, but something reached across worlds to touch her and used her to hold back that blackness."

"What was that blackness?" asked Dominic.

"A very bad dream. I'll explain over dinner. Let's find something to eat. I p

Dominic said, "Very well. We have food in the kitchen."

As they were walking, Nakor said, "By the way, we have to change

teach me some, but you are the one who made teach me.

"Teach her what?" asked Dominic.

"How to be High Priestess of the Order of Arch-Indar, of course."

"High Priestess? That girl?"

"That girl?" repeated Nakor. "She was an Avatar of the Goddess a moment ago, wasn't she?"

Miranda laughed, and Pug put his arm around her shoulders. It was the first time in a long while he had felt like laughing.

Erik said, "We can only assume Subai got through to the magician.

By all reports they simply stopped fighting everywhere about the time

all

the corpses fell over."

Earl Richard said, "Thank the Gods for that."

"I wish we still had cavalry," Erik said reflectively. "I have a hunch

we could get men up to Ylith without much trouble."

"Well, order up a unit on foot and see how far they get."

Erik smiled. "I already have. And I'm sending Akee and his Hadati through the hills toward Yabon."

Richard said, "Do you think we'll ever know what happened, truly?"

Erik shook his head. "Probably not. I've been in battles where I still

don't know what happened. We'll probably read more reports on this fight

than we want to, and I'll write a few of them myself, but truth to tell, I

have no idea what really occurred.

"One minute we were struggling to beat back an army of dead men

Raymond 1~ Feist

and crazed killers, and the next the dead men an fell over and the killers

"What should we do now?" asked Earl Richard.

"Without cavalry, I'm inclined to sit tight until we get word of the situation down in Krondor. But my instinct tells me we need to advance

northward as fast as we can. Fadawah may have fled or been killed, but

that doesn't mean some other petty captain won't try to grab power and

,fashion a modest little Kingdom for himself. And as far as we know, Yabon City is still under siege."

Earl Richard said, "I'm tired of sitting around, myself. Give the order

to advance."

Erik smiled and stood up. "My lord," he said with a bow. He went outside and found Jadow Shati near the Crimson Eagles' campsite.

"Break

camp!" he ordered. "And ready to march!"

"You heard the man!" said the former sergeant. "I want every man ready to march in an hour!"

Jadow turned and grinned at his old companion, and Erik found once more he couldn't resist that man's smile; he grinned in return.

Patrick showed every sign of being on the way to a full recovery. His color had returned to normal and he sat firmly upon his throne.

The Keshian General Asham ibin AI-tuk again stood before the throne, looking even less pleased than the last time he had appeared.

Now

he faced a Kingdom army reinforced by cavalry units from Port Vyor and from the North.

Pug walked in.

Patrick said, "You demanded we be here at noon, Pug. What have you to say to us?"

Pug looked at Patrick, then at the General, and said, "This war is

uninvited, no man crossing the border under arms will survive.
The General stood ashen-faced and shaking with rage, but he nodded.
Patrick beamed. His smile was one of victory. "Dare to linger,
Keshian,
and my magician will destroy your army where it stands."

Pug turned. "Your magician?" Pug advanced upon the young Prince
and walked up the stairs to stand before him. "I am not your
magician,
Patrick. I loved your grandfather and counted him among the greatest
men I've known, and I treasured the love of your great-grandfather
Borric,
who gave me the name c, but you don't own my soul. There are
forces loose in the universe so far beyond your petty dreams of power
and
wealth they are a flood to a drip of water. It is those forces who
command
my attention. I just refuse to sit idly by any longer and see
innocent
women and children slaughtered and brave men die because rulers are
too
foolish to see they have abundance."
Turning to the General, Pug said, "You may also tell your Emperor
that should any Kingdom soldier move south uninvited, every man under
arms who crosses the border will be destroyed."
"What?" said Patrick standing. "You dare threaten the Kingdom?"
"I make no threats," said Pug. "I am telling you that you will not be
permitted any retribution against Kesh. You will both return to your
respective
sides of the border and act like civilized neighbors." ' '
You are a Duke of the Kingdom, a member of the royal family by
adoption, and a sworn vassal to the crown! If I tell you to destroy
that
army outside the gate, you will do so!"

"I wouldn't!"

Nakor stood at her side, and held up his staff. "The boy is all right."

Pug leaned over, almost nose to nose with Patrick, and said, "You who have never drawn a sword in a battle more serious than chasing some

goblins around in the north call me 'traitor?' I have saved your Kingdom,

YOU fool. I did not save it for you anymore than I saved the Empire for

that man's"-his finger shot out, pointing at the Keshian General-"master

. I did it because of the countless souls that would have been lost had

I not."

Looking first at Patrick then the General, Pug said, "Take word to your father, and your master, that Stardock is free. Any attempt to force

Kingdom or Empire rule on that entity will bring my intervention.

They

have my word on that and I shall enforce their independence." Pug turned

and stepped away from the throne. "I care not who sits on your father's

throne, Patrick. You gather together the shards of your broken crown and

rebuild your nation. I care not for your titles and rank. I am done with

your Kingdom." He put his arms out and Miranda and Nakor came to stand on either side. "I renounce my title as Duke of the Kingdom. I foreswear my oath as subject to the crown. I have larger concerns than

didn't he?"

Jimmy said, "I've had more pleasant afternoons."

They had just retired from a council with the Prince. The withdrawal of the Keshian troops was discussed as well as what exactly Patrick would report to his father. It had lasted long past dinner and into the night.

They were walking toward Jimmy's quarters for a quiet moment alone before retiring for the night. "Did you talk to Francie?" asked Dash. Jimmy said, "No. I saw her a brief second but didn't get a chance to really speak with her."

"She's afraid that once she's married to Patrick you'll just stop talking to her. She doesn't want to lose your friendship."

Jimmy said, "That won't happen. One thing about this war, it taught me what really is important and what just seems important."

Dash said, "I know."

There was a note in his voice Jimmy had never heard before. "What is it?"

Dash said, "Just some people I cared about didn't get through this."

Jimmy stopped. "Someone special to you?"

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

Dash turned and said, "I don't want to talk about it today. I'll tell you all about it someday, just not today."

Jimmy said, "Very well." He was silent a minute as they continued to walk along the hallways. "I think I learned something myself, and maybe it's important, too."

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three people were sitting in the room. "Come in and close the door," said Pug.

Jimmy and Dash entered and Dash closed the door.

Pug said, "I could not leave without speaking to you two. You are the last of my line."

Trying to lift the mood, Jimmy said, "Please don't put it that way."

Miranda laughed.

Dash said, "And we do have relatives in the East."

Pug laughed. "There is so much of your grandfather in you two." He looked at Dash. "Upon occasion you look like him when he was a boy."

He looked at Jimmy. "And sometimes you look so much like my Gamina it haunts me."

He opened his arms and Jimmy and Dash came and hugged him in turn. "I shall not return to the Kingdom unless it is for a reason

far more

important than the whims of kings," said Pug. "But you two are my blood, and you and your children will always be welcome on my island."

Dash said, "You have influence with the King. Do you have to make this sort of break?"

Pug said, "I knew King Lyam as a boy in Crydee. I knew Arutha better, but both knew my heart. The King knew me from his father."

Nakor said, "Borric knows me well, and my words might carry some weight, but what Pug is being diplomatic in avoiding is that, short of

an

unexpected disaster, Patrick will someday be King."

"We are avoiding an argument of momentous proportion later by having it now," said Pug. "The Kingdom is in shambles. Patrick is

forced

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by circumstances to yield to my demands. If this confrontation occurred

Jimmy said, "I can't say I agree with Dash, but I know that it is your choice and I wish you well." He smiled at Miranda. "Shall I call you Great-grandmother?"

"Not if you value your life," said Miranda with a smile.

Dash said, "I shall think of you a lot."

Jimmy said, "As shall I."

Pug stood. "Be well," he said, holding out his hands to Nakor and Miranda, and they vanished.

Dash sat down on Jimmy's bed, leaning back against his down pillow.

"I think I'm going to sleep for a week."

"Then make it next week, Sheriff," said Jimmy. "We have a lot of work to do in the morning and one hell of a mess to unravel." He glanced over and saw his brother was already asleep. For a moment he considered waking him, then he shrugged, left, and went next door to sleep in Dash's bed.

Twenty-Eight

Gathis BOWED.

"I am pleased to see you all return and looking well," he said.

Pug, Miranda, and Nakor had just materialized near the fountain that was the centerpiece of the garden of Pug's estate on Sorcerer's Island.

Pug said, "We are equally pleased to see you. How fare things here?"

Gathis smiled his toothy goblinlike grin. "Very well. If you would indulge me, there is something I think you should see before you rest. It should only take a few moments."

Pug nodded and Gathis led him out through the building and across

Miranda stepped around beside her husband and she saw her features upon the statue. "I see myself."

Nakor said, "Watch a moment."

The face on the statue shifted and they saw the features of Robert d'Lyes. Then they saw the features of other students on the island.

"What does this mean?" asked Miranda.

"It means," said Nakor, "that all of you are servants of magic and that there is no one person who shall be the god's agent on Midkemia.

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Rather, many people will work on behalf of returning the lost God of Magic to his place in this universe."

Pug studied the statue as other faces appeared, magicians known to him and those he had never met. After a few minutes Pug saw his own face again. Pug said, "Let's return to the house."

As they walked toward the house, Pug said, "Nakor, I didn't see your face upon the statue."

Nakor grinned and shrugged. "I know there is no magic."

Pug laughed. "It is an all or nothing proposition, Nakor. Either everything

is magic or nothing is magic."

Nakor shrugged. "I find either proposition equally probable, but aesthetically

I prefer the concept that there is no magic. Just power and the ability to utilize it."

Miranda said, "This borders on the type of long debate you two enjoy over wine, and I am very hungry."

Gathis said, "Food and wine wait you in your study, Master Pug."

"Join us," said Pug to his servant.

When they returned to the house, they found a sumptuous table set for them. Miranda took a plate and began piling on fruit and cheeses.

Pug

one individual is risky. Macros, for all his power, made mistakes." Pug said, "I appreciate that fact, having already made quite a few myself. "

Miranda said, "Now that you are no longer a Duke of the Kingdom what are your plans?"

"I still have many thousands of Saaur to relocate to the Ethel Duath.

Eventually I will have to return to Shila and destroy whatever demons may linger there, then be about the business of reseeding enough life on that world so that in a few centuries the Saaur may return." He smiled.

"Then there's the matter of the students here. They need to be taught, and learned from as well. And there's the problem of finding and destroying

Nalar's agents wherever they may be hiding. Other than that, I think I may take up fishing."

SHARDS OF A BROKEN CROWN

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"Tens of thousands died during the Riftwar, and more than twice that number during this latest war, this Serpentwar. These catastrophic events must never be allowed to be duplicated again."

"How are we to insure they don't?" asked Miranda.

Pug said, "That I need to think on. And it's something we all need to be involved with. I think I may have some ideas I'll share with you

...What of Stardock?" asked Miranda.

Pug said, "Stardock was begun with good intentions, but I made too many errors. I thought I would give the students more of a voice in the organization of the Academy, and to be frank, I was a product of the Tsurani Assembly. It's been enough years since then that I think I recognize those errors.

"Stardock will continue and be an asset to us; before-I built the community there, magicians were often persecuted by those fearful of their talents. 'Witches' were hunted down and their pitiful woodland huts burned to the ground, or 'wizards' were walled up in caves to die of starvation and thirst, unless they became powerful enough to keep people away through fear, or they had patrons who were noble or rich. At least

now those have a haven if they care to make their way to Stardock. "And we may find recruits to our cause among those who study at Stardock for a time and leave, seeking something else."

"How do we insure we don't make the same mistakes?" asked Miranda.

"There are many things we will do differently; I will be the final authority here. I may seek your wisdom and that of others, but in critical matters I will decide. I erred in dififidng that was ignoble and arbitrary at

Stardock, and now I know it is the opposite. Without a vision, we become a debating society and a place where habit quickly becomes 'tradition.' Tradition often becomes an excuse for repression, bigotry, or reactionary

long fight. There are powers moving through the universe, vast
terrible

powers that we have only glimpsed. The two great wars we have so far
endured are but the opening moves in a game of chess."

Miranda said, "What are the Gods on our side doing about all this?"

Nakor said, "They are helping you."

"How?" asked Miranda.

"In ways obvious and subtle," said Nakor.

Pug said, "During the Chaos Wars, the very nature of things changed,
and since then the Gods have acted through agents and minions. We are
who we are because the gods have chosen us to be their agents."

"Even Gods need to learn," said Nakor. "Your father's relationship
with Sarig was not particularly effective, from the God's point of
view, so

rather than repeat that mistake, he's elected to try a different
tactic."

Miranda said, "There seems a great degree of futility in what we
attempt."

"Perhaps," offered Nakor, "but we have seen wonderful things. The
creation of the Temple of Arch-Indar is no mean feat. It will be a
tiny,

inconsequential sect for centuries, and most who encounter it will
not

think it equal in importance to the long-established worship of

Astalon,

Dala, Sung, and the other lesser Gods, but the fact that enough
purity of

the Goddess exists in the universe to serve us in balking Nalar's
attempts

to again create havoc on our world is a miracle. There may not be
another

such manifestation for centuries, yet we know one may come."

"What of you?" asked Pug. "What are your plans?"

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Nakor grinned. "Myself. All of us. Everything." He shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps someday I will, but for now I am content to wander, learn things, and help out where I may."

"Well," said Pug, reaching for another cup of wine, "stay a while longer while I bring about the creation of my new council here, and give me the benefit of your wisdom."

Nakor said, "If you think it wisdom, then you do need my advice." Miranda laughed.

Trumpets sounded and drums beat as the Prince and his fiancée departed

the throne room. After six weeks of relative peace since Pug had ended the war, the crown judged it time to make the formal announcement.

Patrick had just finished informing the court that he and Francine would depart at the end of the month to return to Rillanon for the royal

wedding. The nobles and influential commoners in the room cheered and waited to disperse until Patrick escorted Francine out of the hall.

Jimmy approached Erik von Darkmoor and said, "Captain, I just wanted to tell you how impressed I am by what I read of your actions in

Yabon."

Erik shrugged. "After what Pug, Nakor, and the others did, we had little serious opposition."

"Those forced marches, though, must have been punishing."

. Jimmy said, "Still, it was an impressive three weeks."

"I just wish we had more ships," said Erik. "This business of having to do business with the Quegans to get the invaders back across the sea

has me feeling itchy each time I see a Quegan ship anchor off of Fishtown.

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"Blame your old friend," said Jimmy, pointing at Roo, who stood with his wife talking to a minor noble.

"Roo always could smell an opportunity. I just wish I knew how he got the Quegans to make the deal. They're usually impossible to deal with.

Jimmy shrugged. "Probably just found something they really wanted and agreed to get it for them; that's usually how you do business."

"I'll leave business to Roo. Being the Captain of the Crimson Eagles is enough for me."

I'm surprised you didn't accept the promotion," said Jimmy.

'I'm happy where I am. Being Captain of the Prince's Household Guard is a lot more ceremony than real soldiering."

"But it's one step from there to being Swordmaster for a Duke or the -Marshal's position here in Krondor."

Erik smiled. "I'm happy. I like running the Crimson Eagles, and I think the Kingdom needs an army independent of the other nobles. We might have had a different war had we had Kingdom garrisons in Sarth, Ylith, and Zun.

"You may be right, but the Dukes will resist the idea of garrisons in their Duchies they don't control."

"I'll think about that when I return to Krondor," said Erik. "Right now I'm going to Ravensburg and to my wife. It's been months and I wonder if she remembers what I look like.'

Jimmy said, "You're not easy to forget, Captain. Few men come as large as you."

Erik laughed and said, "What of you?"

Roo and Karli joined them and were warmly greeted by both men.

Erik said, "When the Keshians were marching across your estate, how did you avoid being captured like the others in your area?"

Roo laughed. "We were sleeping in an outbuilding while we're rebuilding

the estate house. When the cavalry showed up, they went inside the big house, and we snuck off into the woods. I have a tidy little cave

set up to lie low in. I stocked it first thing after I returned. Too many

armies running around here in the West for my taste."

Erik said, "We're trying to solve that problem, Roo." Karli hid her smile behind her hand.

Roo said, "I haven't seen your brother around, Jimmy."

"Dash is off somewhere. With everyone heading off to the wedding, he's being left behind in charge for a while."

"I'm sure he's distressed at missing the wedding," said Karli.

Jimmy smiled. "Probably not as much as he is at the work to be done putting this city back together again."

Roo said, "I know. Someone broke into the basement at Barret's and took every scrap of food and all the coffee! How can I open a coffeehouse

without coffee?"

"I guess you'll have to buy more," said Erik. He playfully squeezed his friend's shoulder. "You always manage to find a way to make a

deal,

my friend."

Roo smiled. "I have to work a little harder since Jimmy's grandfather is no longer around, but then I'm getting to keep the money I make

rather

than pay taxes."

Jimmy said, "I could speak to the Prince about that if you'd like."

the
last few years. He's being named Castle Reeve while everyone else is
going
to Rillanon for the wedding. I'm sure he and Dash have a great deal
to
discuss. "

"You can't have it both ways, Dash," said Talwin. "You're either
taking care of your duty or you're not."

Dash looked at the head of Royal Intelligence and said, "Look, we're
going to be stuck together for over a month while the wedding is
going
on, so why don't we agree to work together. You take care of the
business
of the Principality and the castle itself, and I'll take care of the
city."

"Because you're unreliable," said Talwin.

Dash's face flushed in anger. "Explain yourself."

"Twice in the last week I know you have arranged to get minor
offenders
released without trial."

"They were hungry people!" said Dash, raising his voice enough that
a few lingering members of the court turned to look. Dash lowered his
voice. "We've got enough trouble dealing with the prisoners we
have. I'm

not going to throw a child who stole bread into a cell with
murderers."

Then he laughed. "And I'm damn well not going to toss him in with
those damned Jikanji cannibals we inherited from Fadawah."

Talwin laughed. "Very well, I'll concede there may be some sense to
your decisions. But since the fighting's stopped, I've noticed that a
great

erik, Roo, and Karli. After he exchanged greetings, he said, "Roo, I could

use employment."

Jimmy said "What?"

"I've resigned as Sheriff."

"Why?" Jimmy persisted.

"We'll talk about that later," answered Dash. To Roo he said, "Could you use some help?"

"Someone of your talents, certainly," said Roo. "But the last time I employed you, it ended up costing me a great deal of money."

Dash grinned. "Well, then I was really working for my grandfather.

This time I'd be working for myself."

"Meaning?"

"I think I would rather seek my own fortune than continue to trade on my nobility and work for the crown. I think that with the Bitter Sea

Company I can find a position from which I can someday start running my own business concerns."

"We can certainly talk about it," said Roo. "Come to Barret's tomorrow

and we'll discuss the matter." He took Karli's arm. "Now, if you will excuse us, we need to be on our way home."

They left and Erik promised to drop by on his way to Ravensberg.

He turned to Dash and said, "Are you certain about this resignation?"

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King might insist you stay."

"Not if I resign my offices," said Dash.

Erik said, "I'll leave you two alone to discuss this. I'm off to

Ravensburg

to see my wife and family."

Jimmy grabbed his younger brother by the arm and steered him to a

dash standacher and rucker. his shell seems for nothing.

Dash grew angry. "Don't throw those deaths in my face, Jimmy. They died for what they believed in, and my choosing to go another way doesn't

diminish their sacrifice. I am just tired of living their vision of what I

should be. no I should be."

Jimmy said, "why don't you come to Rillanon with me? I'll get Patrick to name another Sheriff in your place. We'll go to the wedding, then we'll take ship to Roldem and visit Mother. A week or two with her and

you'll be aching to get back to your criminals."

Dash laughed. "No doubt. No, you go. Kiss Mother and Aunt Magda and the others for me. Tell Mother I'll come to visit someday; I know she'll never set foot on Kingdom soil again."

"She might if I'm crowned King," said Jimmy.

"Maybe for that," agreed Dash, and they both laughed.

Jimmy put his arm around his younger brother's shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Eventually," said Dash. "Right now I just want to get started on a life of my making. I want to use my wits for something other than getting people killed."

Remembering the wild charge at the Keshians' rear elements, the fighting outside the wall before Pug appeared, Jimmy said, "I can't see

much wrong with that. It's just. . .

'What?'"

"It's just that we're our father's sons."

"I know. This isn't easy, but once I made up my mind, I knew it was the right thing. We have duties to each other that are more important than

our duties to a flag or a king. Can you honestly say you can work on Patrick's behalf without question?"

we have problems, certainly, but we have jobs laws.

Dash said, "I've been administering those laws for a while now, Jimmy. I'm not so sure sending a ten-year-old boy to the labor gang for stealing food is just."

"That's just an extreme case," said Jimmy.

"I wish that were so."

Jimmy said, "I have to go. We have been invited to dine with Francine and Patrick. Are you coming?"

"No," said Dash. "I'll send a note with my regrets. I have a lot of things to do before the morning if I'm going to turn my office over to someone else."

Jimmy said, "I wish you'd at least wait until Patrick returns from Rillanon. Maybe by then you'll have changed your mind. It's not too late, you know."

Dash was silent for a while, then he said, "If I do, that will give me more time to get my affairs in order. Very well, I'll wait until the Prince

and Princess return from Rillanon and then I'll resign my offices."

Jimmy grinned. "I'll talk you out of it."

"I'm still not coming to supper. I'll see you in the morning before you leave. "

They embraced and Dash left the great hall, heading out the main entrance and through the courtyard, toward the New Market Jail.

In the darkest hours of the night, before the sky to the east began to lighten, a single man hid in the shadows near the docks. He kept looking

"Who's the new Daymaster now, what Trina's dead?"

"If I told you, it would be my life," said Reese.

"If you don't, it will be your life. I don't mean hauling you to New Market for a trumped-up trial and a hanging, I mean cutting your throat

right now."

"It doesn't matter," said Reese. "There isn't one. There's barely what

you'd call the Mockers since the Upright Man and Trina died."

"Who's the Nightmaster?"

"He died during the war. There's no leadership anymore. Even Mother's ain't safe no more. Someone's setting up a new gang near Fishtown,

for boosting goods unloaded off ships. And there's some bashers setting themselves up down near the old docks. Times ain't what they used to be, Dash."

"Tell me where to find the gangs in Fishtown and down by the docks. "

Reese told him what he knew, then Dash said, "Here's what you need to know. Things are changing in Krondor and we're going to be the ones

making the changes."

"We?" asked Reese.

"You and me."

I get caught working for the Sheriff, I'm a dead man," said Reese.

"Oh, before we're done, you'll wish it was that simple. You're a bright

one, Reese-you were smart enough, to hook up with Talwin and me and get out of the work gang."

"Well, I saw my chance and I took it."

"Who's another really smart lad or lass, someone who works well with the children?"

"Jenny's got a level head and the beggars and pickpockets like her."

her way!

Jimmy rose to depart, and Francine said, "Jimmy, may I have a word with you?"

Jimmy smiled. "Anytime, Francie."

She came over and said, "If we still had a garden here, perhaps we could go for a walk."

"A turn around the marshaling yard?"

She laughed. "That will have to do."

She turned to her father and Patrick, and said, "We won't be long."

They went down the long corridor from the Prince's great hall to the balcony overlooking the marshaling yard. The evening air was warm and the air held a hint of blooms.

"When we return, I shall see the garden is restored as soon as possible. "

Jimmy said, "That will be nice."

"Are you returning to Krondor in time for Midsummer's Festival?"

Francie asked.

"Probably not. I shall sail to Roldem to visit Mother. With Father dead, she'll never return to the Kingdom."

Francine sighed. "They never grew to love one another?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I think at best they enjoyed things about one another. She admired Father's skills as a diplomat; Roldem's a nation of

courtiers. He was a very fine dancer, did you know?"

"I remember seeing him at a celebration in the King's court. He cut a very dashing figure. I had a crush on him as a child."

"He was a very fine father," said Jimmy, suddenly missing him a great deal. "He always liked Mother's ability to organize. If there was one

guest for dinner or a hundred, she always had everything right by the time

with us."

She put her hand on his arm. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Jimmy. I like Patrick well enough; the three of us have always been friends. I used to think I was going to marry you, back when we were children."

He smiled. "I know. I used to find it irritating, then I found it pleasing.

She leaned over and kissed him, lightly but lingeringly. Then she said,

'You're my dear friend. I don't know if I'll become like your mother and Patrick, or if I'll turn my life over to raising a future King of Isles.

I may take up gardening, and if I decide to have a string of lovers, I'll

make you the first one, but most of all, I'm going to need good friends.

"Everyone I know is now trying to be my friend, and I know that what they see is the future Queen of the Isles. You and Dash and a few

of our good friends back in Rillanon are all I have."

Jimmy nodded. "I understand, Francie I'll always be your good friend. "

She took his arm in hers and snuggled into his shoulder. "Thank you, Jimmy. Now, let's go back and rejoin the Prince."

Jimmy knew at that point that he also would eventually marry for reasons of state. He said a silent prayer to any God who would listen that

the woman fate had in store for him was the match of the one holding

That brought some guarded chuckles from a few, but no one felt easy enough to really enjoy the weak humor.

Reese said, "We've got new rules."

"Rules!" shouted a large man in a corner. "Whose rules?"

"Mockers' Rules!" shouted a young woman entering from a far door.

She was solidly built, and plain of features, but she was known for being

one of the smarter thieves in the guild. Her name was Jenny.

"who says there's a Mockers to make rules for?" asked another man.

"The Upright Man!" shouted Reese. "He says."

"The Upright Man's dead!" said a man from the back of the large room. "Everyone knows that."

From deep within the shadows behind Reese, a deep voice said, "The Upright Man's died before, and always returns."

"Who's that?" said the beefy man in the corner.

"One who knows you, John Tuppin. You run the bashers."

The man looked pale at the dark figure knowing his name.

A thin man in the rear said, "Everyone knows Tuppin. He's too big to miss!"

Others laughed, but a few glanced around, worried expressions on their faces.

From the shadows the voice said, "I know you, too, Rat. You're the best point lookout in the Mockers. I know you all.

"I know every thief, cutpurse, dodger and basher, every toffsman and whore who calls Mother's home. And you know me."

"It's the Upright Man," whispered someone.

"You can claim to be whoever you want," said John Tuppin, "but claiming and being ain't the same. I could claim to be the Bloody Duke

of Krondor, but that don't make it so."

From out of the shadows the voice said, "The Fishtown gang was run today."

Suddenly people throughout the room were talking. Reese picked up

to the Durban slavers will be run. Anyone not doing business with the Mockers will be run."

A few in the room cheered.

"Reese is Nightmaster, and Jenny is Daymaster. You have a problem, you bring it to them."

More cheers, then Reese said, "Get out there! Pass the word, the Upright Man is back!"

The thieves dispersed until only three people remained at Mothers.

Dash stepped out of the shadows. "You did well. Tell Tuppin and Rat they did well, too."

"It's a hard sell, " said Reese. "You're going to have to bust a lot of heads before they get it."

"I've a couple of months before the Prince installs a new Sheriff," said Dash. "Between now and then we'll get organized."

The girl said, "I don't get one thing. My are you taking on this job?"

You're the son of the Duke of Krondor! You're never going to be as rich

on the dodgy path as you could be on the straight. If we get caught, weo time in prison, or the work gang. If you get caught, you get hung for

treason. Why are you doing this?"

Dash said, "A promise." Jenny seemed about to ask another question, but Dash cut her off. "You have a lot of work to do and so do I. You need to get someone into the palace and close to Talwin. You need to get

him followed, and that won't be easy. We have to find his contacts and

identify his agents. He's going to be the worst threat to the Mockers we'll face."

he would be a man of importance, one worthy of envy. But he also knew he would live in two worlds, and that most of his life would not be his own.

More than his duty to the crown, given to him at birth:without his consent by his father and grandfather, this duty to a ragged bunch of thieves and thugs was far more binding upon him, for it was a duty he elected, one chosen as a matter of honor, and he knew he would never fail in that duty short of death.

Dash set out through the sewers that would be a second home to him for the rest of his life.

PUG STOOD.

The students who joined him, Miranda, Nakor, and Gathis looked around the cave curiously. Two torches burned, cutting the gloom.

Pug said, "We come together tonight to ratify a vow each of you has already given to me in private. Others will come to join us over the years,

and a few of you will leave, but this group will endure.

"We meet in a conclave, for no one outside this group may know we exist. We must linger in the shadows, hidden from the sight of those who

live in the world of light.

Pug looked from face to face, and said, "Each of you will act on behalf

of people who will never know you exist, who might even fear you or oppose you if they knew of you, out of ignorance or because they are misled.

"Death will be the reward for many who choose this path."

Pug pointed to the mouth of the cave. "Out there are men who have

welcomed
here as before. Again I repeat, no one outside of this group may know
we exist.

"We will deal in dreams and nightmares, in a war few out there can
imagine. We are brothers and sisters in this calling, and we must be
obedient

to the needs of this conclave. No one of us can be above that need.
If our lives are the price, so be it."

No one in the room spoke.

Pug said, "We are the Conclave of the Shadows and we oppose the
madness of the Nameless One and his agents.

"We have endured the Riftwar and we have survived the Serpentwar.

We now prepare for the next struggle, one that few will know of, one
that

will be fought where few can see. It will be a war in the shadows."

Pug put out his hand and Miranda took it. He nodded to Nakor and
Gathis, and led his followers out of the cave, down the path to their
home.