

THE TWO EMPIRES



JACK K BURROUGHS

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By Jack K Burroughs

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For Mum and Dad

Chapter One

The late autumn sun beat down over the town of Rayford, but soon it would give way to the cold frost of winter. Shaded by a small canopy fixed to his master's shop, Jaggar the apprentice cobbler worked on a small pair of shoes. He'd started on them at seven o'clock that morning, and now there was only another hour to go before he could finish for the day and get ready for the dance tonight.

He liked his work, and was glad to be learning a trade that would hopefully allow him to support himself in the future, even if he did sometimes dream of more exciting careers, such as wizardry or service in the Imperial Legions. He knew he lacked the brains or patience required for the former, while his twice weekly training with the Rayford Young Militia left him with little doubt that he wasn't cut out for the latter either. His parents had chosen his profession for him, before they had moved away when he was four and left him in the care of a shoemaker. That was fourteen years ago; now eighteen Jag would soon have finished his apprenticeship and would be able to start his own business. He wasn't really sure what he would do then; obviously he would be a cobbler, but would he set up shop here, or somewhere else? Time was running out for him to make his mind up.

As he was stitching he became aware of something moving in the corner of his vision. To his surprise it was the laces, which were somehow tying themselves into a perfect bow. He looked up in confusion to see Charley, a girl of his age who had been a good friend for the last few years. She was pale from long hours of study but had a healthy flush to her cheeks, and her glossy black hair at shoulder length spoke of daily care. When he had taken up shoemaking Charley had become a mage's apprentice, much to the envy of the town's other children. Jag had always thought her far too pretty for wizard's robes.

"Hi Jag," she grinned. "I see your training's going well."

"Not too bad," he conceded. "I needn't ask about yours - nice trick with the laces. You seem to be doing well."

"My master wouldn't think so. He'd say it was a waste of my talents and a disgrace to the art. But then the hypocrite *does* use magic to light his study. You must be nearly qualified now, then?"

"Well, I finish my apprenticeship in three months, so I guess I'd better be deciding what to do." He frowned and put his work down. "It does seem silly, though, that I've spent the last eleven years learning and all I can do for a living is make and mend shoes. I wish I'd learnt something exciting, like you have."

"Believe me, magic's not nearly as glamorous as you lot seem to think. What do you think we wizards do?"

“Well...I suppose you...chant spells...dance around fires...that sort of thing...” It sounded daft as he said it, but that was what they did in the stories from the few books he’d read after learning letters at Temple.

Charley laughed. “Not quite, I’m afraid. It’s more along the lines of memorising obscure and unintelligible old books, scrubbing the master’s house and making brave attempts at organizing the pile of useless junk he calls a study. I’ve been studying for eleven years and I’ve just about learned to tie shoelaces at two yards. I wouldn’t exactly describe magic as a crash course.”

As she spoke she gestured with a finger at the bare earth at her feet. A pattern was scratching itself into the soil, a letter C embellished with twisting roses. He’d seen her using it as her symbol before, sealing the letters he’d occasionally received which had always set his heart racing. “Mind you, once you know the so-called basics it’s supposed to be easier. Have you seen what the really good wizards can do? My master’s not the best in the land, but he could summon the daemons of the Pit to do his bidding, or so he tells me. Not that he’d want to, mind.” She shuddered. “Did you hear about that dwarf wizard from Axehold last year? No? Supposedly he tried to summon some daemon but couldn’t control it, so the monster rampaged through half the hold before they could stop it.”

“What about mixing potions then?” He felt he was on safer ground here; he sometimes ran into Charley at market when she visited the apothecary.

“Ah, you’re getting closer now. Look at these.” Charley took a small leather bag from over her shoulder and emptied the contents onto the floor. Mainly there were things like plants, but some looked like parts from animals, carefully pickled in tiny glass jars. “Right, so we’ve got silvermoss for general healing potions and treating cuts, some ratanda tails for making a waterproof oil. Oh, and some crushed pale-lily for my face.”

“Is that some magic ointment?”

“No, it’s my make-up.” They both laughed, and then Charley bit her lip in annoyance. “Oh, goodness, I’d better get going. I was sent out for some eggs from one of the farms, and after that I’m supposed to cook them for the master. If I’m late he might not let me out tonight. You’re going to the Guild Ball tonight, aren’t you? I might see you there. How about a dance? Anyway, have a good evening!” called Charley over her shoulder as she jogged away down the street.

“Yes!” cried Jag as soon as she had disappeared from sight, punching the air.

“She said what?”

"I told you, she said she'd dance with me at the ball." Jag and his friend Tommy, who worked at a grocer's shop, were sitting in the Six Ships tavern and Jag had just described his meeting with Charley earlier. The Six Ships was dirty, smoky, occasionally rowdy and generally regarded as an ideal meeting place for the boys of Rayford. Everyone else tried to avoid it. Jag and Tommy had a small table to themselves in the corner of the room and the young grocer had nearly fallen from his chair in surprise.

"Jaggar Garrick, you lucky devil! I've tried to get her to go to the Guild Ball with me for the past three years. However did you manage that one?"

"My natural charm?" Jag suggested.

Tommy snorted. "Yeah, right. I'd say you'd had a spell cast on her if I thought you could afford it. I can't believe your luck." He shook his head. "Anyway, before I forget, old Wilkins from the gatehouse wanted to see you about some odd jobs." Jag groaned. "Not surprising really, I doubt that gate would survive a strong wind, never mind an attack."

"An attack? As if we'll ever be attacked. Ah well, better to be safe, and I could do with the money. I'll be over there tonight to see what he needs, before the ball." He sighed. "I wish I was a mage. I bet Charley could have the roof fixed in five minutes."

"What, you a mage? You need brains." Tommy sniggered, and Jag glared at him. "It would be fun, though. My grandad once saw a really powerful one over in Raybridge. He was having a magical duel. The wizard, that is, not grandad. There were two wizards, throwing around fireballs and summoning monsters all over the place until the guards led them off." Tommy shook his head. "I still can't believe this. Oh well, perhaps it'll be my turn next year." Tommy finished his drink and stood up. "See you this evening, then. I ought to get back to my mum now, and you ought to get over to the gatehouse before dark. I think Wilkins wanted whatever it was done soon." With that Tommy left. His mother was ill, so the boy had to look after her. *I should be going too.*

Wilkins, the gatekeeper, was an old man and constantly in need of odd jobs doing, and as a friend of Jag's master it often fell to him to help out. It was probably just repairing some slates on the roof. As Tommy had said, the gatehouse was somewhere beyond dilapidated, and in truth probably past the stage where in a richer town it would have been demolished and replaced.

It had only been put to the test twice in the last two centuries. A hundred years ago orcs had last marched down from the Maw, a gigantic chasm stretching for miles from where all the evil creatures in the world stemmed, if the stories could be believed.

More recently, Rayford had avoided the worst of the Mannic Wars just fifty years ago; the walls had been enough to keep out the marauding bands of Mannar worshipers that terrorised much of the land. Since the

return of peace no one had bothered repairing the gate and it had fallen almost into ruin.

Not wanting to be late for the evening's party, Jag left the bar and made his way outside to the gatehouse. Tonight was the night of the Guilds Ball, the biggest event in the Rayford year. Jag had always enjoyed it, and this year was shaping up to be the best yet, despite the killjoys that had been calling for it to be cancelled. Apparently it was corrupting the town's youth. Well, maybe it was, but as far as Jag was concerned that was no bad thing.

Though most people were either at work or already getting themselves ready, in this part of town at least there was the sound of heavy drinking spilling out from the many taverns, along with several drunkards themselves. This was the roughest part of Rayford and no sensible person would visit it after dark - or at all, if possible.

Making his way over the rubbish and once a man he hoped very much was merely asleep, Jag finally found himself in Northgate Street, which led out of Rayford. At the end stood the gate itself. It was about thirty-five feet high, with a central tower extending another ten feet. Set into the rough stonework was a wide gate. It had a portcullis protruding slightly from the top, but Jag doubted whether it worked anymore. A narrow staircase led up to the tower, where Wilkins lived.

Just as he was about to start up the stairs Jag was brought to a halt by the boom of a gong. To begin with he couldn't remember what it meant, but he was aware that it was extremely important. He *had* heard it before, but when? It was a long time ago, but the memory was accompanied by no little fear.

A second later, with another boom from above, it came flooding back to him. When he was about eight a fire had broken out in Guildstreet. It was put down to arson in the end, but he remembered the gong tolling out then. As well as standing watching the fire being extinguished, Jag remembered his master standing in front of him, drilling into him that short fast bangs, like then, signified fire, and that long slow bangs stood for attack. The gong now was sounding slowly and deeply.

Attack! Surely there had to be a mistake. *Rayford can't be under attack! Could it?*

His fears were swiftly confirmed when his old friend Wilkins toppled from the top of the tower, an arrow through his throat. Jag's shock quickly gave rise to rapidly rising panic, but somehow he managed to keep a cool head. He didn't know what was out there, but it certainly wasn't friendly and had to be stopped. Therefore, the most logical thing to do would be to close the gate.

Jag sprinted up the steps and crashed through the door. He was in Wilkins' home now. Remembering the time he had repaired some of the

castellations, Jag found the stairs leading upwards. The roof was surrounded by a low wall, and in the middle stood three wheels, one for each gate and another for the portcullis.

Jag was on his way over to them when a hail of arrows shattered on the stone floor in front of him. He instinctively ducked back inside, before seizing his chance to dash for the cover of the block of stone holding the wheels while the unseen archers reloaded. Part of him just wanted to flee back inside, but he could see that the gates had to be closed and that he was the only one in a position to do so.

Now Jag could hear bloodthirsty cries from outside the walls. They chilled him to the bone, for they came from no human throat. He reached up to turn one of the wheels and heard a terrible screech from below him as the port-cullis descended a couple of feet before jamming. Cursing, Jag yanked the wheel as hard as he could, and was rewarded with it snapping off in his hands.

Tossing the useless wheel aside, he tried another. This one was much smoother, being used every night, but as the wooden gate slowly swung halfway closed the wheel abruptly began to spin in the opposite direction, smacking into his left hand so hard he thought it might have broken. From the cries below, both monstrous and human, he guessed that the attackers had run straight into the gate, forcing it open through sheer weight of numbers.

Jag ran to the town side of the tower and looked down to see the street filling with an onrushing mass of green-skinned humanoids: orcs! Though he had never seen one before, Jag was well aware of them through the stories of their bloodthirsty attacks. Seven feet high with boar-like faces they were said to be both willing and capable of ripping a man limb from limb.

Ignoring the pain in his hand, Jag tried desperately to decide what to do. There was nothing else he could do here, and leaving into the street would be suicide. And besides, even if he could escape the gatehouse, what could he do then?

The street was a scene of slaughter as the orcs, still piling through the gate, hacked their way through the unarmed townsfolk fleeing deeper into the town. Anywhere would be safer than here; the front line of the attack was more like an abattoir.

At last he saw his way out. The gatehouse tower was a couple of feet higher than the surrounding buildings and he might just be able to leap to a nearby roof. The one to his right looked promising: only two yards' gap, not too sloped and with a strong gutter to land on.

Jag made a run for it, only to skid to a halt and dive back to cover as an arrow landed ahead of him. Cursing, he realised he'd have to take some risks or be trapped on the roof until the orcs came up to kill him.

Jag tried again, ignoring the arrows falling all around, and this time reached the edge of the roof. A step more put him on top of the wall from where he kicked off. He soared over the gap, planning to continue running, but landed badly and fell forward, banging his chin on the slope of the roof. Regaining his feet as soon as he could, Jag climbed over the peak, putting him on the other side of the roof to the archers.

He was now above a deserted alleyway, so he dropped down and made his way carefully yet swiftly down towards a junction. He could still hear screams from the other side of the building and knew that the invading orcs would be able to advance quickly with little hindrance. Three of the militia in the leather armour of town watch patrol ran past his alleyway, straight into a band of orcs. Jag tried not to listen.

When the orcs had moved on, he briefly looked around for any others before turning squeamishly to the bodies of the militia. He wouldn't usually steal from the dead, but a weapon would do more good in his hands than those of the dead soldiers. *Though not a lot.* The Young Militia Club might have taught the town's boys how to use swords, bows and their hands and feet, but Jag was under no illusions that he was even nearly capable of dealing with orcs. Still, at least he could be armed and have a chance to defend himself, which was more than could be said for the others by the gate.

Fear froze his heart as an inhuman bellow came from nearby. He looked up to see a lone orc running at him from an alleyway, brandishing a crude axe. Jag saw he had two options: be slaughtered unarmed or try to defend himself. Though the latter option carried only a slightly higher chance of survival, it felt infinitely more appealing.

Jag selected a heavy and powerful-looking broadsword from the floor and lifted it up to near his head. When he thought the orc was near enough he swung it in a horizontal arc, a powerful blow aimed to decapitate the vile thing in front of him.

The swing was far too slow and the orc ducked easily under it, letting the sword bite deep into the wall of the building. Jag was forced to stagger clumsily backwards to avoid being split open by the beast's return chop. He retreated but the orc followed, grinning evilly as it readied its own blade for a killing blow. Taking another step backward, Jag was horrified to feel a stone wall at his back. *Looks like this is it.*

As the blade sliced through the air in front of him, seemingly in slow motion, Jag dived in the only direction left to him: down. The blade missed him by a few inches and the orc prepared to finish him off. He was now sprawled on the floor at the monster's feet. A sabre lay on the floor nearby, dropped by one of the militiamen. He grabbed it desperately and hacked at the orc's leg. The green skinned monster howled in pain and rage but collapsed to the floor, cursing the rapidly fleeing figure of Jag in

its guttural language.

Jag was more terrified than he had ever been in his life, and was running faster than he would ever have thought possible. He was almost overwhelmed by the screams, the unintelligible battle cries and the smell, and he felt sick to the stomach at what he had seen. He was running without purpose, clutching the sabre tightly, but with a sudden clarity that surprised him he realized that somewhere there must be a line of defence. After all, Rayford had a substantial militia. Jag doubted they could hold off the assault, but it would surely be better than running blindly until he was finally cut down. There might even be an evacuation.

With a clang of metal against stone a crossbow bolt at his feet brought Jag's attention back to his immediate danger, and he realized he was running down the Main Street. With over two hundred yards of wide open street between him and the town square, where the defence, if any, would surely be, Jag knew that to try to outrun the orcs and their arrows would be suicide. At the first possible chance he turned and darted down a side street. With any luck the orcs would continue their charge down Main Street before they moved onto the maze of smaller streets, giving him that much more time. He was quite pleased with this plan, until he ran into a trio of orcs as he rounded a corner.

His first reaction was to strike out with the sabre he was still carrying, catching the group by surprise more than anything, and giving him chance to sprint on past. As soon as they recovered the orcs were after him, following at every turning and gaining rapidly.

It's a good job they don't have crossbows, otherwise I'd be dead already. But then, at this range a thrown sword or axe would be just as lethal. Anyway, since when have orcs used crossbows? With the orcs just feet behind there was really no time to wonder.

Jag staggered when he felt a small line of pain on his back as one of the orcs' swipes hit home. It wasn't deep, but it forced Jag to realise that he could never outrun them, even with a fresh burst of speed. He had to do something different.

As he passed a door Jag threw himself against it, praying to every deity he knew that he would get through. With a splinter of wood and a pain in the shoulder he did, landing in a hallway. More on instinct than decision Jag rolled at a half-open door, ending up in someone's kitchen. The only hiding place that presented itself was an open cupboard. He guessed his sudden change of direction had gained him a few seconds, and used this time to open the exterior door before climbing into the cupboard. It was large, but still too small for a human to fit in comfortably.

A second later the door burst open and the orcs, seeing the door open and the kitchen deserted, immediately ran straight out the back, leaving Jag to escape through the front

The street was now deserted, so this time he decided to try a more subtle progress. He moved slowly against the buildings at the side of the road, pausing at each junction to check for orcs before crossing. At the entrance to an alley he noticed what looked like a loaded cart pulled by orcs, of the kind that farmers would use to deliver crops to town. As it drew closer Jag realized with revulsion that it was piled high with corpses - human corpses. Jag knew that orcs were carnivorous, and were known to eat humans, but even the most horrific stories, told to the boys by merchants' guards in smoke-filled taprooms, never mentioned them collecting bodies by the cartload.

Jag hid in a doorway until the foul thing had passed, leaving its stench behind, then made his way into the street it had come from. With any luck the orcs would have passed on already. Once in the street he checked for its name; if he had his bearings right it would be Butcher Street. *Oh*. To his disappointment he saw that it was in fact Mage Lane. *That's where Charley lives!* Jag recognized the house, halfway down with an imposing black door and two stories of brick. He'd never been inside, but had walked there with her whenever the chance arose.

He knew it would be far more sensible to carry on and try to find some degree of safety, but Jag just had to check. He tried to justify it to himself with the thought that if she was somehow alive her skills could help him survive. *Well, she could always tie their shoelaces together*

Reaching the door he found it already ajar, so, fearing what he might see, he gingerly pushed it open and stepped through. Inside was a wide hallway with an open door on both sides and a staircase at the end. Jag checked the ground floor first. One room was a living room and the other a kitchen, both deserted yet clearly looted - furniture had been overturned and possessions scattered.

Up the stairs was a landing with three doors leading off from it. The first led to Charley's master's bedroom, in the same state as downstairs. The second was the wizard's study. A desk lay overturned in the centre, but one of the only other things Jag recognized was a world map on the wall. In the top right corner was the Mawlund, and at its heart the giant chasm known as the Maw. This was surrounded by the Black Mountains, south of which and not even shown on the map was Rayford. The rest of the Dianthic Empire spread out to the west from the capital of Dianthus, several miles south along the Ray Valley. To the east lay the Provinces, to the south the desert empire of Krakenbar, and on the far western edge the sea.

More importantly there was no sign of Charley there, so Jag moved on to the last room. This had to be Charley's bedroom. He took hold of the handle, his heart pounding and his blood running cold at the thought of what he was about to find.

As soon as he opened the door he saw the blood. The wooden floor was slick with blood, both the dark blood of the orcs and the bright red of human blood. The table in the room was broken. At the foot of the bed lay Charley's shoulder pouch, and next to it her finely worked knife, blood still wet on its blade.

Jag sank down against the wall, grief in his heart and tears in his eyes. Screams from all around seemed to echo in his head; any could have been Charley in her last moments before she was cut down and her body dragged out into the street. He had been so caught up in the moment up until now that he hadn't had chance to really take in the full horror of what was happening, but now it hit him like a punch to the stomach.

Almost everyone I've known is in this town, and soon they'll all be dead. Jag sat motionless for a couple of minutes, grief slowly turning to anger, until a burning desire for revenge seemed to be the only thing remaining in him. *I'm going to be dead sooner or later, but if Charley could go down fighting then so can I.*

He didn't scream, or cry, but strode silently from the room with the sabre gripped tight in his shaking fist. He could hear a low grunting from downstairs, but anger overwhelmed his fear. Jag charged down the stairs, taking the final half in a single leap and swinging wildly at the orc as it turned into the hallway. His blade cut deep into its shoulder and it staggered backwards, only for Jag to bury his sabre to its hilt in the orc's unarmoured chest. The creature collapsed, a look of pathetic confusion on its face as it fell.

With the creature dead at his feet Jag felt his knees buckle as the adrenaline left him, and sat down heavily on the stairs. He felt sick at the scene of carnage and at his own sense of pride, but mostly at the knowledge that Charley was dead and soon he would be joining her.

As soon as he had caught his breath and felt capable of standing, Jag left the house and continued on his path toward the town centre with a heavy heart but a determination to live. Two streets further on he heard the sound of fighting, and felt a flash of hope at the thought that there might be some way to truly fight back against the orcs.

Peering around the corner he saw a battle consisting of the militia and a few armed civilians against the orcs, more and more of whom were piling in every minute. In terms of opponents slain the humans seemed to be winning, but they were greatly outnumbered and would very soon be overwhelmed. Jag thanked the gods he was on the human side of the fight, having unknowingly crossed the front line. The captain of the militia stood before a pile of greenskin corpses just five yards from Jag: Nicholas Hamman. The man had taught him how to throw a knife.

When the captain saw Jag he broke off from the fighting and ran over to him. *They're not even trying to escape. He's going to bring me into the fight,*

and I'm going to die here. I've made it this far just to die fighting. Well, it's not like I've got anything left to live for.

"Impressive. Looks like you can handle yourself after all," said Hamman. Jag realised he was covered in orc blood. The man's face showed hope, with a grim acceptance of his own fate. "I've got to hold back these orcs as long as I can, but I've got a use for you. Listen now. Rayford has no hope left. The best thing we can do is get word to the Emperor so he can organize the defence. You must get to Dianthus and warn him. Take this." The captain removed a thin gold chain from around his neck and handed it to Jag. From it hung a small gold circle, with on one side a complex engraving and the other the Rayford coat of arms. "This should get you an audience and make them believe you. Oh, and try to keep quiet about this on the way – mass panic is the last thing anyone needs."

The man placed a hand on Jag's shoulder and sighed before continuing. "More immediately, go down that street, then take the second left turning. Follow the street until you reach the wall, and there's a small gate you can escape through. After that it's down to you. If you're lucky the orcs won't have reached that part of town yet.

"Well, I never thought you were Legion material, but I guess I must have underestimated you. Good luck and may Debin speed you." He turned back to regard the rapidly losing battle where the Rayford line was in retreat. "You haven't much time, but I swear we will buy you every second the gods are willing to sell. Now go!"

Jag could see little point in arguing, or explaining he had killed an orc more by surprise and luck than skill at arms, so, seeing people he knew fighting and dying to allow his escape, the only decent thing he could do was try his best to make their sacrifice worthwhile. The captain was right: Rayford was doomed, but he had the chance of averting more such tragedies. Besides, Jag had always dreamed of adventure, so he could hardly complain when it was handed to him on a plate.

True enough, Captain Hamman's directions led to a small gate in the wall, which itself led to the forest surrounding Rayford. Outside it was surprisingly quiet, a harsh contrast to the town centre. The sounds of battle drifting over the high wall could have been from another world. Wanting to put as much distance as possible between himself and the orcs, Jag tried to keep up a light jog, but was exhausted from his terrified running earlier.

As the night set in it seemed impossible that only a few hours ago he had been speaking to Charley, and that if things had worked out differently, if the orcs had chosen another target, or maybe even if Wilkins had done his job properly and repaired the gate as he promised every year, Jag would have been dancing at the Guilds Ball. *How quickly priorities can change.*

Chapter Two

Jag stepped wearily onwards, gazing up at the firefall overhead. The supernatural precipitation, caused by particles in the sky becoming charged by magic, descended in a multi-coloured glow like sparks from a fire before fading to nothing about a yard above his head. It filled the night sky like falling stars of red and gold.

He had avoided the road at first in fear of encountering more orcs, and had spent the last eight or more hours making his own path through the light woodland of the Ray Valley. It had occurred to Jag that despite having covered several miles he didn't have a clue what direction he was walking. Whichever way it was he couldn't keep it up for much further, even at a walk. He had been hoping to reach a village, or at least a roadside inn, but now he was simply too tired to care. At least the exhaustion kept him from fully taking in the events of that day. At the next good tree he collapsed into a gap in its roots, barely having pulled his cloak about himself before falling asleep.

Jag awoke far later than usual, chilled to the bone and stiff beyond belief. His stomach protested at having missed the last two meals, but he had nothing to eat and didn't trust himself to try any of the wild plants. *Charley would have known which were safe.*

It struck him that he should have left some sort of marker to show which way he'd been travelling, but last night he had been far too exhausted to think straight. Taking his bearings from the sun he settled for a fresh start to the south, and hoped he wasn't doubling back towards Rayford, and that the orcs hadn't overtaken him during the night. It was past noon when he saw a building in the distance, half hidden by trees. *A village?* The thought of finding food and perhaps transport cheered him slightly.

However, as he got closer he saw that it was ruined, and not the sort of building he had been expecting at all. A large, round dome dominated the other smaller buildings around it; it looked like a temple. Jag was nearly upon it when he realized just what it was: a Mannic temple, constructed maybe sixty years ago for the worship of the mysterious Mannar. The war of fifty years previously had come about when their meddling in human affairs culminated in open conflict between followers of different Mannar. Their eventual defeat by Dianthic loyalists had resulted in the outlawing of all things Mannic and instant death for their worshipers. Jag was aware he would be committing a capital crime simply by being near the place, but given the circumstances he didn't think anyone would mind him taking the opportunity to have a quick rest out of sight of any passing orcs.

He picked his way through the fallen masonry and, seeing the door was blocked by rubble, climbed the wall and through a gap. Inside a paved

courtyard was almost filled by the domed tower stretching up from the middle. Weeds had pushed up the flagstones and the carvings that marked every surface had been weathered beyond recognition, but Jag couldn't help but think of the many stories of the Mannar he had heard. He shuddered to think what could have gone on there.

He sat for a few minutes to rest his legs. The courtyard was deserted, but he still half expected something to jump out at him. *Pull yourself together, Jag. It's just an old ruin.* After a while, curiosity drew him towards the tower. Apart from a forbidding black metal door - locked fast - the only way in was through one of the tall gothic windows that circled the tower. He approached somewhat gingerly and peered through.

An obsidian altar carved into grotesque shapes sat at the top of steps leading down to a pit of utter blackness. It was darker than the darkest night, and seemed to catch and hold the eye. At first Jag thought it was empty, but slowly shapes came into view, constantly out of focus, the shapes of creatures, creatures with claws, creatures with tentacles, creatures swimming from the darkness towards him...

Jag wrenched his gaze away from the foul thing, leaping backwards. His foot caught on a loose flagstone and he tumbled backwards. The sudden impact, though fortunately leaving him with no more than bruises, immediately dispelled any further curiosity he might have had. He fled back into the forest.

The forest was gradually thinning, and by late afternoon there were only scattered clumps of trees breaking the landscape. Jag was now really hungry, and contemplating the berries growing on low bushes hungrily. Even a town boy like him knew that wild berries could be poisonous, but surely not all of them. Taking the gamble had to be better than starving.

Luckily his dilemma was resolved by a plume of smoke from beyond a small clump of trees. With a weak cry of relief he quickened his pace to reach it.

Up close the hamlet was little more than a few houses and an inn barely bigger than those, but to Jag it was a warm bed, food and perhaps even transport to the city. The inn - the Raging Bull - hardly lived up to its name, but was welcoming enough, and didn't charge much. *Lucky for me, as this money's got to go a long way.*

Jag ordered the only meal they served and a pint of beer - warm, with a similar variety of choice - and took a seat at the only one of the four large tables with a spare chair. It seemed the inn had brought in the whole hamlet, which wasn't really a huge achievement. After he had finished eating the tables were pushed together and the innkeeper presented the evening's storyteller, a short and twitchy man with a balding head. A round of applause greeted him. *This must be as wild as it gets out in the sticks.* An expectant hush filled the room as the little man stepped out to

stand in its centre and cleared his throat. Jag was too full to sleep, and was grateful of anything to keep his mind occupied on something other than the previous day, and so he settled down to listen.

“My story tonight is called ‘The Opening of the Maw’.” Jag smiled. He’d heard this tale countless times, both in Temple and taverns, but it was always a good one. “Now, let me begin.

“Many thousands of years ago the whole world was green and fertile, and the inhabitants lived in harmony. War was unheard of, and all people were kind and gentle, taking what they needed from the land and leaving the rest. The area we know as the Mawlund was flat and forested, and home to a people living close in touch with nature.

“‘But how was such a golden age possible?’ I hear you ask. The answer is that the gods of Good, including Dianne, patron of our good Empire, had after a great struggle imprisoned the forces of Evil within an otherworldly prison. Without the influence of Evil upon our world we could commit none.

“This earthly paradise endured for many years, until the angelic overlord of this prison world was tempted by Zalissimix, the Serpent God, to show mercy to Evil.”

Some in the audience tutted and shook their heads. A fellow in the robes of a cleric of the Dianthic pantheon spoke up: “Suffer no mercy for Evil, for thou shalt receive none in return.”

The storyteller continued. “This angel loosened the bonds of this prison. This proved to be a terrible mistake, as in so he weakened them. With a terrible blast, all Evil in the universe broke free, ripping its way through the universe.

“The tear through to our world formed the Maw, and the explosion of Evil power devastated the surrounding land, leaving the broken wasteland we know today and pushing up the mountains around the Maw. This unholy energy also upset the climate and left great swathes of land as desert or arctic tundra.

“But worst of all, the force of Evil entered the world. Orcs, goblins, daemons, devils, and all manner of nightmare creatures arrived in immeasurable numbers. But the true tragedy was far more subtle. With the influence of Evil gods the people of the world - humans, dwarves and others - were themselves tainted. Darkness entered the heart of every man, woman and child. For some this meant no more than a moment’s jealousy now and then, but some were filled with the taint and, alongside the newly arrived monsters, waged war on their previous friends.

“Now it seemed inevitable that the world would fall beneath this tide of darkness, and many despaired. Others, however, forged the weapons that had never before been needed, and vowed to fight for their land. One such man was Prince Baylar, who led his clan south from their ruined

homeland to the lands around the River Ray. Here he raised an army of men, dwarves and all others who would fight for him, and led a crusade back into ground captured by the forces of Evil.

“He drove them back as far as the newly-risen Black Mountains, where his army charged into battle against a great Evil horde on the slopes of Mount Vomar, the largest of the range. While the battle raged he and his most trusted henchmen, clad in marble armour, the first of its kind and granted them by the goddess Dianne, broke through the enemy lines and crossed the Black Mountains. They were making for the Maw.

“After their epic journey through the wastes of the Mawlund, a story in itself, they arrived at the Maw to find a bottomless chasm still spewing out countless horrors, and a dark citadel being constructed across it. The brave band fought their way along half finished streets to the centre where stood an unholy temple to the gods of Evil. At its heart was a room looking out over the chasm, through which dark and terrible magics spewed from the world of Evil.

“In this room they found Spitacus, Arch-general of the Evil armies. The courageous companions confronted their daemonic foe, knowing the fate of the world rested on this one fateful combat. In a fierce battle Prince Baylar’s companions were slain, but their sacrifice allowed him to strike a killing blow to Spitacus. The foul creature toppled into the Maw, and with the one force unifying them gone, the Evil armies across the land were plunged into anarchy.

“Somehow in the chaos Baylar fought his way out of the city and, though himself terribly wounded, he returned to his army to lead the push to drive the monsters back. The disorganised enemy was crushed and fled back into the wastes of the Mawlund where they remain to this day. Prince Baylar founded a new kingdom along the banks of the River Ray, and built a capital dedicated to Dianne. The Marble Guard were founded as his bodyguard.

“And that, my good friends, is why we today have the Maw in our world, and how the city of Dianthus first came about. Next week I will be presenting the epic tale of Trinkertip the gnome bard, and his great battles to legalise busking on the streets of Bar-Salo, accompanied by a selection of his music upon lute and dulcimer.” There was a round of applause. “Thank you, thank you.”

In the rush to leave Jag took his plate and cup to the bar before making his way up to his room. It was plain but clean, with a bed and a battered wooden chair. He felt better than he had all day, with a full stomach and a place to sleep. The local brew was potent enough to provide a mental fug that kept out the worst of the horror of the day before. Far too soon the morning came, and he awoke from a strange dream about crusading gnomes.

After a quick breakfast of egg and bread he left the inn and began to explore the single street of the hamlet, which was called Greyhill after the large rock nearby. In the daylight he saw from the position of the mountains that he had come about sixty miles along the Ray Valley - further from Rayford than he'd ever before been.

He was trying to procure transport towards Dianthus, but the closest Greyhill had to a coach station was a farmer's cart trundling sedately through. The farmer agreed to take Jag as far as Raybridge, the next town and Rayford's larger sister, but as Jag paid a few coppers from his pouch he began to doubt whether he had enough money to reach the city. As a last resort he could use the medallion and claim passage - he had realised earlier that it was the insignia of an Imperial Courier - but the captain had told him to avoid spreading panic, and he didn't want to invite any more questions about his purpose than necessary.

The cart rolled off down the unpaved road. Jag felt sure a wheel would break off in one of the many ruts and potholes, but somehow it reached the next settlement intact. The village wasn't much, but it was bigger than Greyhill and had a mill to which the farmer delivered the sack of grain that had been travelling so far on Jag's feet.

The countryside was flat between the mountains to either side, with the occasional clump of trees or lonely farmstead. The cart did not reach another village until well into the afternoon, and this small farming community was similar to the last. They stopped at the inn for a quick meal and drink, while the farmer, a friendly if slightly opinionated old chap named Hallen, explained that rather than spend the rest of the night here he would press on to the next village.

"We should make it around midnight, Debbin willing and with a bit of luck. Then tomorrow we'll probably reach Raybridge by late afternoon. There you've got the coach station or the river straight to the capital. Your choice."

With that they started back on the road, and sure enough just before midnight drew up in yet another of the small villages that littered the north of the Dianthic Empire. The inn here had none of the previous night's entertainment, but did have comfy beds. After an easy day's riding it took Jag a while to get to sleep and he lay awake with nothing but the death and destruction of the attack to fill his head, before slipping into nightmare.

Still, in the morning he woke refreshed and ready to continue. They made an early start and were making good progress by noon when they decided to stop for lunch. Both had brought sandwiches from the inn, and they had settled down to eat in the shade when the sound of voices drifted over from the road behind the trees. Hallen was about to stand up and hail their fellow travellers when Jag held him back. He'd heard stories about

these roads, and it never hurt to be careful.

Cautiously he stood up and parted the branches just enough to see four figures heading towards them. They were armed, and three had large, full sacks over their shoulders. *Bandits!* They were still a couple of hundred yards away. It seemed they hadn't seen him yet, but with the cart parked at the side of the road it wouldn't be long. He crouched back down and warned the farmer.

"Four bandits heading this way. Hitch the horses and we might be able to get away before they reach us." Jag considered leaving the cart and escaping on horseback, but he had never really learned to ride and could hardly stay on a horse with a saddle and reins, never mind without. Now was not a good time to try.

Either the bandits were moving faster than he thought or the rehitching of the cart genuinely took as long as it felt, but they were still making the final preparations to leave when they heard running footsteps and shouting from further up the road. Jag swore vehemently as he realized they wouldn't have chance to escape. The only thing he could do was recover the sabre he'd brought from Rayford, which was now dumped unceremoniously on the floor of the cart.

The bandits spread out to surround them and Jag found himself face to face with a tall man armoured in studded leather, with a scar across his face and squinting eyes. Two more stood behind him. Jag seriously doubted that he could take on three experienced bandits on his own, or that the farmer could. Small as the chance was, he'd have to try and talk his way out of it. Perhaps they'll decide to take what they want and let us live. Unfortunately, as it turned out, they did.

"Nice little necklace you got there. Gimme it an' I'll let you go." Jag realized with annoyance that the Courier's medallion had slipped out from under his shirt. *The barbarian doesn't even recognise it. A lot of respect it's going to win me with this fellow.* All the authority in the Empire wasn't going to help a dead man, and he'd have more chance of completing his mission by handing it over, but would he be taken seriously without it? More immediately to the point, even if he did hand it over, did he have any guarantee that the man would be true to his word? Probably not. Jag stalled for time while he thought what to do.

"No...you don't want this...completely fake... I've got money, will that do?" He was strongly aware of the stench of the bandit's breath.

"Just gimme the bloody medal. And drop that bloody sword as well."

"Which first?" asked Jag, regretting the words even as they left his lips.

"Don't you try ter be smart wi' me." The bandit - not carrying a sack, so presumably the leader - smacked him across the cheek with the flat of his blade. It stung terribly, and Jag stepped reeling back, but as the man pulled back for another blow he saw his chance. Leaping forward he thrust

his sword clean through the bandit's stomach and out the man's back. The bandit screamed and collapsed, nearly ripping the sword from Jag's hands, but he withdrew it just as the other raiders began to react. *Oh pekk.*

Planting one foot on the wheel of the cart Jag jumped up onto the seat. Hallen stood petrified as the two raiders his side approached. Grabbing him under the arms Jag heaved him up into the cart, and a slash that should have severed the farmer's neck instead bit into his thigh. The man cried out in pain but Jag ignored him, grabbing the reins and whipping the horses into action. They sped away, leaving Jag in control of a speeding cart and a bandit still clinging onto the side.

The large man was not deterred by a punch to the face, so Jag picked up his sword from next to him and with one hand on the reins hacked down through the bandit's fingers. With a shout the man fell off, leaving Jag trying to drive the cart as it rapidly approached a bend.

Of course, the horses knew what to do better than he did. The cart sped round the corner and followed the road onward, leaving the bandits far behind. It wasn't long before the horses tired, and they slowed down to a gentle trot.

By now farmer Hallen had recovered from his shock enough to see his wound wasn't as bad as he'd initially feared and had stopped groaning. He sat up, muttering something about young drivers, but took the reins and thanked Jag profusely. He even offered to refund Jag's money, but seeing the man's leg bound in sackcloth Jag couldn't accept. He had enough for the barge from Raybridge, anyway.

After that the journey continued uneventfully, and when dusk fell he could see lights, or rather one great patch of light, on the horizon: it was the town of Raybridge.

By now the main gates were shut tightly, but the guards patrolling the walls with their spears and pointed helmets were used to opening a side gate for late night visitors. As they rolled under the torches that topped the walls Jag noticed a gleam of light on the floor of the cart. Looking down, he was shocked to see a severed finger. His reaction softened somewhat when he saw the ring it wore: it was silver set with a small ruby, and had obviously fallen into the cart when he got rid of the bandit. Jag removed the ring and cast the finger away into the darkness.

When he looked up he saw that they were driving down the main street of the town, past merchants' shops lit by flickering torches. Soon they had reached a grand square bordered to the east by the River Ray - the same River Ray that ran through both Jag's hometown and his destination of Dianthus. Rayford and Raybridge had more in common than the same river, and the similarities in the style of buildings brought a lump to Jag's throat.

Barges lined the quay, most carrying goods down the river but some

clearly the private transport of the capital's nobility and gentry, and the light from many taverns reflected on the still water. The cart pulled to a halt and Jag leapt down, while Hallen remained perched on the cart. Seeing the farmer's wound, Jag drew the ring from his pocket and pressed it into Hallen's palm.

"Take this and go get yourself some help for your leg. A town like this is bound to have a professional healer, and with that you can probably even afford magical help." The farmer was staring at the ring in awe, as he'd likely never owned such jewellery.

"No, Jaggar, I couldn't. It was you who saved me, after all."

"Yes, but it was also me who got you into that mess in the first place. If I hadn't been daft enough to put up a fight they'd probably have left you alone. Take it, go, and if you get any change you can buy yourself a new cart."

"Thank you, Jaggar. I really appreciate this. How can I repay you?"

"Listen, you don't have to. Believe me, this ride has been more help to me than you know."

Hallen smiled warmly, though his face was pale even in the torchlight. "Well, my friend, I can hardly say your company was enjoyable - half of it has been sheer terror. Still, if you haven't got yourself killed then I'd be glad to see you again in the future."

"Likewise. Good luck, and watch out on the road. We don't want a repeat performance of today."

Hallen chuckled. "As long as you're not driving that's good enough for me." And with that, the farmer waved and drove off into the town. Jag was left standing in the square wondering where to spend the night. Eventually he settled on the Seven Sausages as the inn that sounded quietest and least likely to be swarming with muggers and cutthroats.

This turned out to be a good decision, and after only three sausages he retired to a small room in the roof. It wouldn't do to spend all his money for the barge tomorrow, after all.

That night he found it hard to sleep at first, a mixed blessing in that it staved off the nightmares while leaving him haunted by thoughts for the future. In a couple of days' time he would be in Dianthus, and his task would be over. Then he'd be on his own, without friends, home or purpose. He'd always known he would have to take control of his life one day soon, but he hadn't counted on that day arriving quite so suddenly. All he could do was make shoes, and he needed somewhere to do that. He hadn't even finished his apprenticeship.

Jag supposed he'd end up cobbling in some remote village like Greyhill. He'd probably make his way around the country until he found a village without a cobbler, and then spend the rest of his life making and repairing shoes, maybe getting married and having a family of his own. Of course, he

wanted a peaceful life, and that was exactly how he'd always seen his future life mapped out, but after the last few days the thought of it seemed...well, boring.

And what about the orcs? Perhaps he could join the Legions and help in the coming battles. He certainly had more experience now than most who signed up. In that case either he'd be killed, or he'd stay on and spend the next twenty years fighting across the Empire, from frontier duty on the Krakenbaric border to a lonely posting in one of the isolated forts on the edge of the Mawlund. At least he'd end up with a pension, and perhaps a grant of land. This was all assuming, of course, that the Dianthic Empire wasn't overrun with orcs by then.

As the hours slipped by another thought began to prey on him: his killing of the bandit earlier. Not that he regretted it, not for a moment - if he hadn't he himself could have been killed, and his task would have been left unfulfilled, his message undelivered. But the man he had killed was just that: a man, a human being like Jag. Troubled by these thoughts, Jag finally slipped into an uneasy sleep.

By the time he woke early next morning Jag had put all these problems out of his mind, and was looking forward to a relaxing day on the barge down to the city. As the sun rose over the rooftops he made his way back down to the riverside to try and get a ride. Many barges he recognized, as he had watched them sailing through Rayford up and down the river. One he knew particularly well, and he called to its master from the quay. Captain Todmor stumbled sleepily up to the deck, his red uniform flamboyant yet well-worn.

"Currently sailing downriver, terminating at Dianthus Docks, stopping anywhere en route for embarkation or disembarkation." The description was familiar. "Charging at one silver shilling per day or part thereof. Two silver for a cabin. Bar in hold. Returning up river in..." He stopped, and squinted across the water. "Jag? Ah, Jag my old mate, it's you! Didn't expect to see you on this leg of the trip. Wanting a lift, or just dragging a poor man out of bed for the fun of it?" asked the captain, dropping a gangplank across the gap. Jag hurried across.

"I think the up-river trip's just been cancelled," Jag said quietly as Todmor led him below decks. He grimly went on to relate the events to the north, knowing that he could trust Todmor not to spread panic. Even as he did he wondered if he might have been better warning people as he travelled, buying an extra day or so to evacuate. But he had been told to tell no-one but the Emperor, and he was sure the militia captain knew best.

At the end of his explanation, Captain Todmor stood with his mouth hanging wide open for some time. Then, seemingly sorting himself out, he threw open the door to the hold and ushered Jag through, shaking his head

and checking his sword-belt.

By the time he returned Jag had found both a cabin and the bar, and was helping himself to a well-earned drink. It was the best he'd tasted for days, not some home-brewed stuff from a tiny village tavern but real Jennic ale imported from Jenna in the Provinces. The other passengers weren't yet up, but Jag had noticed several closed doors in the corridor by his cabin. Todmor had woken his crew in order to set off early, an hour before due. As the barge pulled out of the harbour Todmor joined Jag in the bar, and they sat talking and drinking, Jag hoping as he did so that the drinks were on the house, as at this rate he would have run up quite a bill by the evening.

As the morning drew on the other passengers filtered down from their cabins above. First came Thandus, a merchant from Dess, another of the Provinces, who kept them entertained with his tales of adventure on the road to Krakenbar. Just after lunch a warrior named Ral embarked, hoping to leave behind his life as a sword-for-hire to sign on for the Legions in Dianthus. After a few evaluative swings that very nearly lost Todmor some fine wine he informed Jag that he had a good sword, and asked how he'd come by it.

"Oh, my father was a Legionnaire," Jag replied, feeling the truth wouldn't serve his aim of secrecy.

"Really? What Legion?"

"Uh, the Third - Ray Valley Sentinels." He knew the name, just as anyone from Rayford would have, but not much else. Hoping to avoid further questions, he went on to tell of his recent encounter with bandits, which quickly distracted the soldier. Ral was soon telling his own (almost certainly exaggerated) stories of war in the Provinces. It seemed he'd fought for just about every barony, county, duchy and principality out there, always at the time of their greatest victories.

"Sounds like you were doing pretty well for yourself," Jag observed. "Why give it up for the Legions?"

"What, can't a man want to do his duty for his Emperor?" asked Ral in mock offence. "Well, actually," - he leaned in conspiratorially - "work's getting a bit thin on the ground at the moment. Some peace settlement at Vestria. Of course, it'll never last. It never does. But I've got mouths to feed back here, and it's time I settled down into a regular job where I can bring the kids and missus out with me."

It was late into the evening when they all retired to their individual cabins. Jag slept soundly and untroubled by dreams, aided to no little extent by the quantities of fine ale he had consumed that day.

In the morning he awoke refreshed, if mildly hung-over, and ready for the final leg of his journey. After breakfast with Todmor and his new friends the day continued much like the one before, though Jag forced

himself to stick to weak beer. He'd need a clear head for later. For now, though, he was almost able to enjoy himself – for as long as he could keep his mind occupied, anyway.

As the day drew to a close and dusk fell over the small barge, a shout went up from someone standing on deck. Everyone trooped up to see the lights of Dianthus, capital of the Empire, shining over the river ahead. They lit up towers and streets, arches and bridges, great boulevards and narrow alleys, the high levels and the low levels. Dianthus had been built up over hundreds of years in a kind of bowl shape, with stepped tiers of levels on both the inwards and outwards facing sides. At the east of the city a great cluster of towers stretched up to the sky, the tallest and grandest of them all being the Imperial Palace. This was Jag's destination, and it truly struck him for the first time that today he would have the rare honour of meeting the Emperor in person.

Chapter Three

Silent except for the gentle splash of water against the bow, the barge slid along the river towards the rapidly growing beacon of light that was Dianthus. As they drew closer Jag could make out the main gate on the north face of the wall. Set within a massive stone gatehouse and protected by a portcullis and iron-banded doors, it was the entrance for the many wagons, horses and pedestrians that traversed the roads on either side of the river to climb a shallow slope arching over the river. Below the gate the river passed into a great tunnel, and it was towards this that the barge was heading.

The inside of the gateway was well-lit by torches, illuminating the numerous portals lining the walls of a man-made cavern. Straight ahead was a giant archway for the larger ships, but they were heading towards a much smaller portal to one side.

Beyond this they emerged in a proper harbour in the open air. Jag looked upwards and saw the higher levels reaching up into the night sky above him. *I guess I'll have to head up if I want to reach the palace.*

Captain Todmor stepped across to the quayside with a rope and soon had the barge moored up. The passengers filed across the gangplank and away into the inns and hostels lining the sides of the harbour. After waving goodbye to Ral and Thandus, Jag was left on board with Todmor.

"Right then. I'm off to meet the Emperor," said Jag, grinning.

"What? You don't want to be out in the docks at this time of night; you won't last five minutes if you don't know your way around. Why not sleep on board tonight and go up to the palace tomorrow morning? No sense in coming all this way just to end up face down in an alley with a knife in your back."

Jag considered Todmor's offer, but the urgency of this message, suppressed these last couple of days on the river, now filled him with a burning need to do something. "No, I've got to. It'll be seven hours 'til morning and those seven hours could be vital. A horde of orcs could have descended upon the city by then." He knew it was highly unlikely the orcs were anywhere near Dianthus – such a large force couldn't move quickly, and he must have saved at least two days by taking the river.

"You don't even know if there is an invasion yet," the captain pointed out. "It's still terrible, but for all you know Rayford could have been an isolated incident: an unusually brave raid that's even now returning to the Black Mountains." It was true, but didn't change the fact that it could be an invasion, and the Emperor had to know.

"I'm going."

Todmor shook his head. "Well, Jaggar Garrick, you're either brave or stupid, but I see I can't change your mind. If you're going to the Palace

you'll need to reach the higher levels. The easiest and quickest way up is the Grand Shaft, in the centre." He pointed across the quayside. "Take that alley, turn right and keep going until you reach a bigger street. It's called Rogue Lane, I think. Follow that until you see a tavern called the Knife in the Dark. It's got a black sign with a silver blade on it. Then take the next left down an alley to the main road. This runs straight to the Shaft. Your best bet is probably Level Seven. That's the main entrance for visitors, and you're more likely to get an audience there. From then on, you're on your own."

Jag ran through the directions in his head. "What was the first turning?"
"Right."

He frowned. "And what's this Grand Shaft thing, anyway?"

"You'll see soon enough, assuming you get that far." Todmor reached into his jacket and removed a small metal cylinder. He flicked something from one end to the other and presented it to Jag. "Take this. There aren't always any left at the Shaft itself. Just stick it in your pocket."

Still none the wiser, Jag thanked his friend for the confusing gift. "I'd better get going."

"I'd go with you, but you're a braver man than I am," admitted Todmor.

"I can handle myself," Jag boasted, with more confidence than he genuinely felt. Todmor's warnings had left him with a feeling of apprehension not quite overpowered by his growing adrenaline.

"Glad to hear it. I'm off tomorrow morning, but if you need a lift I'll be back in five days time." Jag opened his mouth to protest, but Todmor held up a hand to stop him. "I know there's orcs up river, but if you're even half right then there's going to be a lot of people needing transport to Dianthus. And how about you? Any thoughts on where you're going after this?" Jag shook his head. "Well, you know how to find me. Good luck."

"My luck's been doing a grand job so far. I just hope there's some left." Bidding Todmor goodbye, Jag set off down the alley and found himself in another world.

Rayford had had its rough patches. As in every sizeable town, there were places honest folk generally avoided. But compared to the Dianthus Docks, they were like a palace. This was the land of the after-dark people: those whose business demanded that they act beyond the gaze of the law. Here anything could be purchased - for the right price.

Jag walked swiftly into the alley that Todmor had indicated, already wondering about the wisdom of his decision to head straight for the Palace. Above him the city's brightly lit upper levels rose like a glittering mountain, but the streets below were sparsely illuminated by the odd lamp on the side of a building or the grimy windows of one of the many taverns. Every time he had to cross a patch of darkness he felt tense, half expecting a knife between the shoulder blades.

He gradually became certain he could hear footsteps from behind. He quickened his pace, but still they grew ever closer. Eventually he could bear it no longer and turned to face a vicious looking man holding a curved knife. He leered at Jag but, seeing the sword on his belt, left to look for easier victims.

Jag was passing a tavern when a fight spilled out in front of him, a man collapsing into the gutter with a bloody face. Shocked, he hurried past.

After two very long minutes he reached Rogues Road. While still worse than any slum Jag had before seen, it was at least lit, and he felt a little safer. Eventually he saw the sign of the Knife in the Dark, and turned down another dark alley. If anything this was worse than the first, but he concentrated on the distant light at the end.

He finally emerged into the main street, which, if not exactly glamorous, was much better maintained and regularly lit by torches. The taverns and shops seemed a better class than those he'd seen before. It soon passed under the level above, becoming a tunnel with the roof arching twelve feet above.

Eventually the street led into a wide plaza, open to the sky at the centre of the city. It was grander than anything else he'd seen in the Docks, but his eyes were first drawn to the blue beam of light that shone up into the sky from the floor. Almost immediately they moved to the people rising up and down within it. *This must be the Grand Shaft. So what now?*

A rather inebriated young woman in a short dress staggered past him into the blue light. After fumbling for a few seconds with a silver cylinder identical to the one in Jag's pocket she began to rise up the thirty-foot-wide column, albeit slightly shakily. At a higher level - Jag guessed the Fifth - she stepped off and walked away.

Well, that hardly makes things clearer. Still, if she can do it, so can I. Jag strode across to the Shaft, feeling rather daft, and gingerly placed his hand within the beam. He instantly recoiled, for it felt like he'd submerged it in tepid water. But his skin was still perfectly dry, and he realised that the feeling must have been simply dense air.

He stepped in, ignoring the unnatural pressure, and instantly began to ascend. *Level Seven, right? I guess this must be the first.* He counted the levels as he rose. *I could get quite used to this. Beats stairs any day. Three, four, five...this isn't too bad, I wouldn't mind living here. Seven. Right, now for the tricky bit.* Paddling the air as though it was water, he pulled himself over to the side and stepped off onto a walled platform, before crossing the narrow walkway that linked it to where the Seventh Level itself started on top of the Sixth.

The contrast with the Docks below struck him immediately. The streets were cleaner, and the buildings bigger, grander and in better condition. It wasn't the best part of the city - Jag guessed that was further up - but with

the frequent lanterns on the walls, and the city watchmen patrolling in their well-polished breastplates, it felt safe. Jag's only worry was of being ejected as a vagabond; his tattered, stained and smelly clothes, having shared his adventure since Rayford, made him feel decidedly conspicuous.

He was in a large square. At its centre a small area of trees and flowers surrounded a statue of the goddess Dianne, the city's patron. Other streets led off from each side. While each appeared to be residential, his destination was clearly marked by the cluster of great towers looming over the buildings to the east - highest of all the Palace itself.

It wasn't long before the street passed under the level above, and a few hundred yards further on it ended abruptly at the blue stone walls of the Palace tower - the building from which one of the largest empires in the known world had been governed since its founding 647 years ago.

In the wall stood an imposing pair of doors, twenty feet high and cast of copper. Both were closed tight, with no handles, only a stone knocker on the left door and a closed shutter on the right. Gingerly Jag approached, and struck the knocker. A deep boom resounded through the street, and it seemed to Jag that surely the whole city must be woken.

A minute later he was still standing waiting. *Come on; open up for Debin's sake!* Finally the shuttered window scraped open, and an old, wrinkled face peered down at him, its pointed nose upturned.

"What the Pit do you think you're playing at lad? This 'ere entrance is for those with legitimate business only, not vagrants like you." Jag looked down at himself and reddened. "I'm sure you have no business here. If you've got an official Request, Complaint or Information I suggest you contact your local Imperial Bureau."

"But I have to see the Emperor! I'm-"

The gatekeeper laughed out loud. "Oh really? Then come right in," he sneered sarcastically. "You don't have to see the Emperor, and even if you did you'd have a hard job - he's out of the city, and doesn't get back until the day after tomorrow. So I suggest you get back to your own level. Goodnight and good riddance." He slammed the shutter, and the sound of chuckling quickly faded behind the copper door.

"Bloody bureaucrats! I bet I've got a bigger bloody Information than you've ever seen in your whole boring life! If you'd done half of what I have in the last few days you'd probably have a heart failure! And...vagrant?" Frustrated, he smacked the door again, to annoyingly little effect. Jag kicked the gate, shouted some choice oaths at it and then flinched as a clay beaker smashed at his feet. He looked up to see a figure in a nightcap silhouetted against an upstairs window in a nearby house.

Muttering his apologies, Jag hurried off into the city in search of accommodation. The organization that had got the Dianthic Empire where it was today was in danger of being its downfall. *To the Pit with stupid*

gatekeepers! An Imperial Courier was supposed to report only to the Emperor, so even with the medallion there was no point in returning before His Imperial Majesty was back in residence. *If the city's overrun in the night we can all lynch that fool behind the gate in whatever afterlife we end up in.*

The first inn he came to was a cosy little place called The Heart and Hearth. The young landlady wrinkled her nose in distaste at the sight of him, but with nearly all his money in her hands she re-examined her opinion sufficiently to allow him a room for two nights, a cold meal and a flagon of weak ale.

That night he was untroubled by dreams, though whether due to a relief at arriving or the late hour he finally made his bed he didn't know. Whatever the cause, he woke refreshed and eager to explore the city he had heard so much about since he was a child.

After a light breakfast he set off towards the Grand Shaft. In the morning it was bustling with people, both rising and descending. Jag decided to work his way up through the city from the bottom and therefore spend the evening up in the more hospitable upper levels.

Upon reaching the beam of light he paused. Last night he had simply floated up – how was he to get down? He noticed the other Shaft-users holding something as they approached: metal cylinders like the one Todmor had given him. Some were adjusting them before returning the device to a pocket.

Jag examined his. Painted onto the ends were the words 'up' and 'down'. A small stud protruded from a groove running the length of the cylinder; it currently sat at the 'up' end. He pushed it across and pocketed the curious device.

Right. Now for the leap of faith. Despite the evidence before his eyes of others using the Shaft, and his experience of it the night before, Jag still had to think twice before stepping out into the air above such a drop. *Here we go.*

Thankfully he didn't plummet to an early grave, but drifted down at a sedate pace. The fact that he was now falling, albeit slowly, made the downwards journey slightly more disconcerting, but it didn't take long to reach ground level in the Docks.

They were somewhat friendlier by day, and he even saw a couple of guards on patrol. However, Jag soon moved on up to the more tourist-welcoming areas on the Eighth Level and above. Until mid-afternoon he wandered around the museums and galleries that marked Dianthus out as the cultural as well as political capital of the Empire, including the Mannic War Memorial Arch, the Old Krakenbar Embassy, the Augustine Gallery and the Imperial Museum. The latter contained treasures and relics both from history and distant lands, and here Jag saw scholars from all around:

even Krakenbar, despite the state of war that had existed between the two empires for over three hundred years.

At lunchtime he ate in the Plaza of the Emperors, a square in front of the Palace that provided a magnificent view over the bowl-like centre of the city. It took its name from its statues of every Emperor since the Founding at Dianthic Year 0. This place was filled with tourists and young nobles, but Jag found a spot at the feet of Kordan the Fourth (DY 482 - 501).

For the rest of the day he continued to make his way further upwards, through the town-houses and urban estates of the most successful merchants and the nobility, to the eighteenth and highest level: the skyship docks known as the Aviary. Amidst the confusion of gantries and cranes sat the skyships themselves, from the sleek frigates of the Imperial Sky Fleet to the barges and freighters of the most wealthy traders.

He stood for a while on a quay, watching a skyship laden with barrels hovering down to dock. As it drew alongside a berth three iron clamps swung out to hold it in place, and a gangplank was dropped to bridge the gap. It was sometimes hard to believe that the first skyship had been developed less than thirty years ago by the mages of Dianthus.

While the private vessels were often converted from their more conventional nautical cousins, the latest generation of Imperial sky power was specially built to the latest designs. Those docked at Dianthus were little more than a garrison – the main fleet was stationed at Beacon Hill to the east, including the great capital ships that he had occasionally seen filling the sky above Rayford.

After admiring the views from the top of the city, Jag realised dusk was falling and was reminded by his stomach that he should be getting back. He was nearly at the Grand Shaft when he heard the loud hum of a large skyship approaching. Looking up, he saw it descending towards a nearby berth, illuminated by torches. As it drew closer he could make out its angular, metallic design; at the aft stood a tall poop deck, and a reinforced forecastle at the fore, while ballistae lined the sides, stowed under wooden covers.

As Jag watched it docked at a berth to his left. The clamps swung out and a boarding plank descended, and a group of finely dressed people hurried off and away into the darkness. They were followed by a short, stout figure. In the dimness of the quay Jag could not make out any details, but he was fairly sure it was a dwarf.

Dwarves were known as recluses, rarely venturing out of their mountains to the west. There were known exceptions, such as the merchants who had occasionally passed through Rayford, but while those had always struck Jag as being somewhat scruffy, their long beards uncombed, the figure stepping onto the quayside was smartly dressed and carried himself with a noble bearing.

After that there was no further sign of activity on the skyship, so Jag decided to get back to the tavern. The journey back down was uneventful, as was the rest of the evening. After some pottage and ale he went up to bed, and tried to ignore his growing feeling of anxiety for the next day, hoping for more than the anti-climax of the night before.

Jag stood outside the Palace gate, which loomed even larger in the light of day. This time, though, a single flag flew in the sky above the tower. It bore the arms of the Imperial family, and its meaning was clear: the Emperor was in residence at the Palace, and Jag could finally deliver his message.

Once again he struck the knocker, but this time the shutter slid open almost immediately. The enthusiastic face of a young gatekeeper peered out from behind it.

“Greetings, Sir. What is it you require?”

He held out the medallion, wanting to show it before he could be turned away again. “Jaggar Garrick, Imperial Courier.” The porter’s eyes widened. “I come from Rayford with urgent news for the Emperor.” The face of the guard would have been comical were the situation not so serious.

“Uh...I guess you’d better come in.” With a screech the heavy copper doors swung open. Beyond was a hallway of stone, running some twenty-five feet before entering a well-lit room. With surprise he realised the reason for the long entry hall: he was passing through the tower walls. It was said that even if the rest of the city was levelled to the ground the Palace tower would still be standing proud.

The chamber was easily the grandest Jag had ever seen. Columns surrounded the atrium, and the huge battlefield painting on the wall opposite was flanked by two wide staircases. Uniformed civil servants hurried past on jobs of their own, eyeing him with disdainful confusion. *I suppose without them the supply of Perrenese wine might dry up, or maybe even Munroviaian saddles. If only they knew what brings me here.*

The gatekeeper led him up one of the staircases, and along the gallery at its top overlooking the atrium. Doors led off on the other side, but Jag’s guide was heading for the end where it rounded the corner into an amazingly tall room that formed a round shaft thirty feet in diameter running seemingly the entire height of the tower, the middle being filled by a light beam reminiscent of the Grand Shaft. As they approached a round platform about six feet wide rose to meet them; the porter gestured for Jag to step on before following, taking hold of the handle rising from the centre of the disk and causing it to rise.

They floated smoothly up the inside of the tower, past countless levels of

doors and arches and not stopping until they reached the topmost floor. The arch there was filled by two doors of solid bronze, just seven feet in height but no less imposing for it. In alcoves on either side stood figures in marble armour. The Marble Guard. Both men were easily six feet tall and completely encased in their armour of black stone, polished to a gloss and streaked with crimson. Only their eyes were visible through the slits of their visors. Heavy broadswords hung at their sides. One stepped forward, addressing the gatekeeper.

“State your business with the Emperor.”

Then the porter was explaining why Jag was here, and Jag was presenting his medallion as identification, and all of a sudden the doors were sliding soundlessly open and Jag was stepping into the throne room.

He had, for some reason, expected the throne room to be grand and uncluttered, focusing on the throne and its occupant. However, while certainly grand, it was otherwise utterly unlike his conception. The Imperial throne itself sat empty at the back of the room, facing the doors opposite, but the centre of attention was currently a large table surrounded by five men, two of them dwarves, and three women.

One of the dwarves Jag recognised: it was the one he had seen leaving the skyship the night before. But his eyes were drawn to the man whose presence dominated the room: a man in his late thirties who, despite looking as though he hadn't slept in a while and showing signs of the pressure he was under, still managed to convey a sense of regal majesty. It was His Imperial Majesty Emperor Samuel Titus the Third, ruler of the lands and cities of the Dianthic Empire by the will of the gods.

The people at the table were hunched over a large map, and looked up as Jag and the porter entered the room.

Bowing almost to the ground the gatekeeper turned to his Emperor. “Your Majesty, may I present Mr Jaggar Garrick of Rayford, come to-”

“Corporal, corporal, I'm sure this young man can speak for himself,” the Emperor said in gentle interruption.

Nervously Jag stepped forward, feeling the eyes of the room on him. “Uh...Your Majesty. I am Jaggar Garrick, from the town of Rayford. I come to inform you that seven days ago my town was attacked and overrun by a horde of orcs. As far as I know there were no other survivors.” The thoughts of all those he'd lost threatened to overwhelm him, but he brought his mind back to the present.

“Rayford has fallen already? Damn it!” A look of despair entered the Emperor's face, and he rubbed wearily at his eyes. When he looked up, though, a glint of determination filled them. “This just makes our work here all the more urgent.” He took a seat at the table. “Sit down, Jaggar, and tell me everything you know.”

Jag sat, and told the Emperor all about the destruction of Rayford, in as much detail as he could recall, and briefly of the journey that had brought him to the capital. When describing the destruction of his home town Jag felt tears in his eyes, but managed to pull himself together to finish his story. The Emperor and his aides listened with expressions of sympathy, and occasionally surprise. Afterwards Jag sat back in his chair, knowing he had fulfilled his purpose, and hopefully done his bit to help prevent other towns meeting Rayford's fate.

The Emperor rose. When Jag remained seated one of the aides reached out to pull him up, but Titus shook his head. "Jaggar," began the Emperor suddenly, "you have taken great risks for your Empire, and so I feel it is only right that I enlighten you with the full situation that faces us.

"We have feared the orcs were preparing to mount an invasion since the first reports from the northern forts two weeks ago. While orc incursions are sadly not such a rare event, and can usually be dealt with by the might of the Imperial Legions, it has become clear that these orcs are better armed, equipped and numbered than had before been seen. We had hoped that the forts of the Rydal Line would have been able to hold them off, but it appears that the horde broke through some days ago.

"This attack thus poses a far greater threat than has been seen for generations, possibly greater than the Legions can deal with alone. We need help, and our only hope lies with the dwarves, who may be persuaded to aid us in this crisis. Preliminary talks have already begun – I have just returned from an initial meeting with the ambassador myself – but the next stage is to put our full case directly to the Dwarven Council of the Holds. This is to be the task of Lord Hogan—" he gestured to a man of about sixty who stood next to him, a man who still managed to look quietly dignified despite the patch over his left eye – "but it seems we may already be too late. Nevertheless, all we can do is press ahead with all speed, and hope that the Legions can repel or at least hold off the attack until help arrives."

Jag looked with surprise at the man with the eye-patch. He recognised the name of Lord Hogan, of course, but had not recognised his face. Lord Hogan had been one of the great heroes of the Mannic Wars. The older man leaned over to whisper something in his Emperor's ear. Titus nodded approvingly.

"Lord Hogan has suggested that you could accompany him to Axehold, to tell your story to the Dwarven Council. He will present what facts we have, but feels that an eyewitness account might help to hammer home the gravity of our situation and, if nothing else, appeal to the Council's emotions. After all you have been through over the last few days I will not command you to do so, but I ask you to seriously consider it. You would travel with the Dwarven Ambassador Dorjek on his skyship." The dwarf

Jag had recognised inclined his head towards him. “So, will you help take our plea to the dwarves?”

In the few brief seconds he thought about the question, Jag identified three options available to him. He could decide that he’d done more than his fair share already and leave this city behind, travelling from village to village until he found somewhere to set himself up as a shoemaker, all the while waiting for his life to be once again overrun by orcs. Or, he could sign himself up to the Legions and help in the coming war. Or he could go along with the Emperor’s proposal. He would be doing more for the Empire than he could by sword alone, and at the same time would be safe and seeing more of the world than he’d ever expected. There wasn’t really a choice.

“When do we leave?” he asked the Emperor.

“Tomorrow morning.”

Chapter Four

There were a lot of things Aramil needed right now, but a fight wasn't one of them. A shot of brandy, yes, and maybe his pipe or a good cigar, but not a fight. He reluctantly handed his purse over to the thug, and the sharp pressure on his throat was withdrawn. For a moment Aramil thought the mugger might decide to kill him for the sake of it, but the brute turned away with a sneer and disappeared down some dark Dianthic alley. Sighing with relief, Aramil felt his neck. It was intact, which was more than could be said for his dignity.

The young man looked around in disbelief. The other people passing through this part of the city hadn't batted an eyelid at the robbery. Aramil had heard countless stories about the Docks, but this was beyond a joke. *And the stupid thing is I could have gutted him before he even touched me.* He had been warned before he left not to resort to defending himself until it was really necessary. It wasn't that the Guild of Weaponsmiths cared about the life of some degenerate from the docks, but drawing attention to himself could jeopardise the mission.

Cursing all the inhabitants of Dianthus's lower levels - under his breath - Aramil carried on through the city. At least it was light enough to see. Lighting the odd torch was one of the few forays the City Watch made this low down. *Maybe a few guards around would make the place safer. Or maybe not.*

Checking his map while trying to look as though he was an experienced local was not an easy task, but Aramil thought he was still on track. For one thing, the stench was worsening, so he must be approaching the water.

A huge cloaked figure stepped out in front of him, blocking his path. *Not again!* He was running out of concealed purses to hand over. But the man in front of him drew back his hood to reveal the rough but welcoming features of Scott, an old friend of his from the Guild.

"What are you doing down here?" asked the large man with concern.

"Guild business," Aramil replied simply.

"Of course. I've been getting it too recently; I'm sure it's just a fuss about nothing."

"If it's come to sending high ranking members down to this Pit-like dump there must be something serious going on."

"Ah, I don't know. I leaves those sort of things to those what know. I'd rather be hammering out a new blade than messing around like this. If only the Guild would let me," Scott muttered.

"They've never been this bothered about smuggling before. We all know it goes on, but that doesn't mean we can do anything about it."

"If only they realized it. I don't pay my dues to be sent tramping round

the city.”

“You’re not the only one to feel like that. There hasn’t been this much grumbling in the Guild in all the time I’ve been around. But I’d better get off. Hopefully see you in nicer surroundings sometime soon.” Scott agreed, and Aramil left him to head away into the docks.

As the second son of the prosperous Solen family this wasn’t Aramil’s usual haunt. But he was a member of Dianthus’s Guild of Weaponsmiths, and he went where ordered. While he did have some skill as a smith Aramil had been enrolled in the Guild more for the political side of things. It was a common path for those of noble birth not joining the Legions or taking public office, as the Guilds wielded great power in the Empire. Too much, some said, but it was certainly a popular means of gaining influence. The Solen family had long associated with the Weaponsmiths, so Aramil was following in the footsteps of his ancestors. Figuratively, that was. *I doubt many of them would have stood for being sent down here.*

Still annoyed about his current task, Aramil penetrated further into the lowest level. Here the small buildings and houses began to give way to sprawling warehouses. This gave him less choice in route, but the streets were slightly wider and more regularly lit.

Aramil smiled as he passed a warehouse bearing the arms of the Guild of Weaponsmiths. *So this is where all our steel comes in. But why couldn’t they send one of the members from down here?* He knew why, really. It was a matter of trust. As a noble son he had quickly risen to a prominent position in the Guild. He was supposed to negotiate on behalf of the Guild and handle internal administration, but here he was on some secret mission. The Guild clearly thought this a serious matter.

As he rounded the corner of the warehouse Aramil found himself standing on the waterfront. The water wound through the Docks to the great gate where ships entered. Such ships were now lined up along the quay, inhabited only by rats and night-watchmen.

His task seemed fairly simple. The Guild had recently been getting worried about the smuggling of weapons and materials into the city, and had been informed of a certain ship thought to be involved. All Aramil had to do was board it and find evidence: an illegal cargo of weapons, so the Harbour Watch could be called to check. It wouldn’t be good for the Guild’s reputation if they demanded a search of an innocent ship.

His target was further down the quay: the *Ebony Arrow*, a standard kind of name for a standard kind of ship. It was of an ex-naval class and had doubtless been sold as surplus to a merchant after the invention of skyships. Although stripped to the civilian limit of weaponry, the *Ebony Arrow* would still be capable of defending itself.

Aramil strolled along the quay in a way he hoped was innocent yet tough. A single light shone from within the ship, but it was otherwise

deserted. The ships to either side were similarly quiet. *Good. Not even a watchman on deck. How very careless.*

The gangplank was down, so it was a simple matter to cross over onto the ship and descend a set of steps at the back. As he crept across Aramil noted the two wide doors that had been added to the centre of the deck. They were wide enough to admit most cargoes. *It should be Avana here. She was always the better one at hiding and creeping.* As he thought of his sister he smiled. Avana had been enrolled in the Guild of Mages, and was still studying. *I don't really wish it was her here. It's up to me to look out for her. Not that she's not capable of looking out for herself, though. More capable than me, in some respects.*

Aramil crept down the steps, aware of each and every creak in the old timbers. The deck below had been opened up, so that it consisted of only one room filled unevenly with large cloth covered crates, while in between trapdoors were set into the floor. Opening a few Aramil discovered that some led to cabins while others opened into the hold.

His first task was to investigate the crates in this room. He suspected any illegal cargo would be hidden on a lower deck, but he liked to be thorough.

Drawing a small knife, Aramil sliced open the side of one crate. It was full of foreign foods, which was just what he had been informed it was paying tax on. The next few crates were the same, so he continued his search.

Aramil wasn't exactly afraid of being caught. Obviously it would ruin his mission, and quite frankly be rather embarrassing, but he doubted the ship's crew would harm him. Once he revealed his rank and that the Guild knew exactly which ship he was on, they would probably hand him over to the guards. Then the Guild would pull a few strings and he'd be free.

When his search of the main deck had proved fruitless, Aramil descended into the hold. Here it was pitch black, so he lit his small lantern. The glow illuminated walls of crates on either side, but only for a few yards - beyond that could be anything.

Aramil tensed at a movement from behind the boxes. It must have been from near the floor. *Rats. Avana would hate it.* Quietly groaning at the long search ahead, Aramil set to work.

Several minutes later he had grown thoroughly bored of his endless discoveries of fruit and spices. When he reached another trapdoor in the floor Aramil decided to take a break and investigate the deck below. *Could be packed with smuggled swords.*

A rickety ladder provided access to a smaller room. Yet more crates filled it, but these seemed of a different design. A more military kind of design, free of any kind of identification or merchant's mark. Aramil peeled back the canvas cover and peered inside.

Aha! This is it. The box was packed with combat knives and daggers. Ripping open others, Aramil unveiled all manner of weapons, light armour and other fighting equipment. *There's enough here to equip a small revolution!* That was all he needed. All Aramil had to do was tell the Guild, and they'd have the Harbour Watch down on the ship like a ton of bricks before the night was out.

Having made a small attempt at restoring the crates to their original condition Aramil was ready to go, and climbed back up to the main deck. The crates were just as he had left them.

As he turned towards the trapdoor he stopped. *There's someone else here...*

The sound from behind was soft, but enough to make Aramil dart forwards. He was rewarded by the sound of a knife sweeping down through the air behind him. *That was close!*

"Stop!" called Aramil as he spun around. "I am Aramil Solen, and I come here on the business of the Guild of Weaponsmiths." The limited light of his lantern was not enough to see clearly, but Aramil was certain he heard a chuckle. *Ah. This is where the plan goes wrong. Badly wrong.* He drew his finely-wrought rapier from its embroidered scabbard. Like all noble sons he had trained from an early age in fencing. Now he would have to put his skills to use.

As his assailant advanced Aramil held up his lantern. The light glittered from a black mask covering the lower half of the figure's face, and it wore black robes. *That's not your ordinary sailor. Or smuggler, even.* The robed figure struck out with its long knife, and Aramil only just deflected it. It struck again, and he was forced back by the flurry of powerful blows. *I'm not going to win here.* Spinning around, Aramil fled along the hold.

The lantern rattled for a few steps then went out. Aramil dropped it. A door loomed out of the darkness ahead, and he had only a moment's warning to raise his hands before crashing through it.

Beyond was a small but luxurious cabin, lit by a few candles. A wide window looked out over the docks. Running at it, Aramil leapt through.

He'd never learnt to dive, so he jumped feet first. This proved to be a stroke of luck as he hit the balcony on the deck below.

Aramil collapsed in a heap, winded. His attacker was silhouetted at the window above. It peered into the darkness below, and then disappeared back into the room.

Taking his chance, Aramil lowered himself from the balcony and dropped down to the water. It was cold, but he was a capable swimmer. He'd swum in pools, anyway, not this foul-smelling filth. Aramil headed for the quay, spurred on by the appearance of a bright light on the ship.

It took less than a minute to reach dry land. Aramil hauled himself out of the water. *It could have been worse. I could have been wearing my good*

clothes.

The next thing he heard was a terrifying explosion from behind, and a wave of heat washed over him. Turning around he saw flames billowing out from the deck of the *Ebony Arrow*. Something had detonated in one of the holds.

From the speed at which the ship sank into the water, the explosion must have occurred at a most unfortunate spot. *Or most fortunate, if you were hoping to destroy the ship quickly. Could it have been deliberate?* Various possibilities rushed through Aramil's mind. *They may have destroyed the ship to stop their smuggling being discovered. Sounds drastic, but that was clearly a substantial operation. Either way, right now all I have to do is get back to the Guild and let them deal with it.*

Aramil found his return journey undisturbed. Most locals were crowding along the quayside, watching the fiery spectacle. The serious criminals were taking advantage of the distraction to burgle anywhere worth burgling.

Soon Aramil had reached the centre of the lowest level and was rising up the Grand Shaft. At night the column of magic force cast a faint blue glow over the surrounding buildings. He automatically floated off at the Twelfth Level to find himself in a more familiar street.

The road was well-paved and edged with ornate buildings. These were the residences of the richest members of the middle class and minor nobility. The street ended in front of the cluster of massive towers that jutted from the east of Dianthus, becoming the open plaza known as the Forum.

The Forum was lined on four sides by many of Dianthus's guilds and its very best shops. The city's residents liked to gather there to chat or – if sufficiently well-off - eat in the fashionable bars and cafés that spilled out into the plaza. Aramil himself often met with friends and colleagues at lunch or before work. It was generally full well into the evening, but at this time of night only certain bars were still open. There was no one to comment on the dripping figure that hurried across the square.

The familiar coat of arms hung over the doorway to the Guild of Weaponsmiths. The door was closed, but Aramil was immediately admitted by the porter. He went first to his small office to collect a change of clothes, then to the members' bathroom to dry himself. When he felt restored to his usual standards of presentation Aramil headed deeper into the guildhouse, stopping outside a heavy oak door. The mahogany plaque labelled it as the Master's Reception.

A frequent visitor, Aramil entered without knocking. As expected the room beyond contained a number of old and grandly dressed men.

"Ah, Mister Solen. I hope from your return that you bring good news," greeted one - the Guildmaster, Hector Tremple.

“Yes and no, master,” answered Aramil as he nodded to the high ranking guild members. “The ship I searched did indeed contain weaponry, but obtaining evidence may prove difficult. The *Ebony Arrow* is currently at the bottom of the harbour.”

“Good grief,” replied the Guildmaster. “A messenger just informed us of a ship fire in the docks. We asked you to search the ship, not sink it.” Aramil explained all about his encounter on the ship, and how he had escaped. “My apologies. I had not expected you to meet any danger on board. We all thought your status would be enough to guarantee safety. Even without proof, we trust your word. It is, however, not enough to convince the Watch.”

“You say you trust me, but I can tell that you know something else.” Aramil stood with his hands clasped behind his back. “With respect, smuggling has been going on since before the Guild was formed. We can’t stop it, so we ignore it. Why take an interest now?”

The Guildmaster chewed his lip in consideration. “The situation is getting more complicated. We have reason to suspect there is another agency behind it.”

“Couldn’t it just be normal smuggling? Dishonest men avoiding the tax?”

“How many smugglers would try to kill a noble or sink their ship to avoid discovery?” the Guildmaster replied. *He does have a point there. Who was that with the black robes and mask?* Aramil was silent. “There could be more than just profit at stake here. We must all be on the lookout for signs as to who is behind this.”

“I’ll keep an eye out, Master,” Aramil promised.

“I suggest you get back home and get some sleep. It isn’t healthy to go swimming at this time of night, you know.” Tremple only joked when he was worried. Taking his advice, Aramil bid the men goodnight and left.

The Solen family’s house was on the Twelfth Level of Dianthus, not far from the Forum. Aramil semi-consciously followed his daily route around the curve of the city as he pondered the ship, the attacker and the Guildmaster’s worries. By the time he was stood in front of the old wooden doors to his home Aramil had reached the conclusion that all he could do was put it out of his mind for the time being. *I’m not going to solve the problem by losing sleep over it.*

He knocked gently, but then before he could let himself in the door was pulled open. Beyond stood a young woman about five years older than him.

“Hello Sally,” Aramil greeted the family maid. “You must have been waiting by that door.”

“I was, Mister Aramil. On your Mother’s orders. She’s been worrying herself about you.”

“I’ll go and let her know I’m back. Is Avana around?”

"Yes, she got back a while ago. I think she's in her study. Is there anything you want me to bring you?"

"No thanks, Sally, I'm fine. I should think you can get to bed now. It must be past midnight."

"It is. I'll see you in the morning." The maid slipped gratefully away to her bedroom. Aramil wandered through to the living room, where his mother sat reading in a soft chair. She looked up when Aramil entered, and a look of concern passed over her face.

"Aramil, darling, at last. But what happened to your arm?" she asked.

Aramil looked over his arms until he found the cut on his left elbow. It wasn't deep, but after being in the water of the docks he ought to get it cleaned up. "That must be from my fall."

"What fall? What have you been up to?" his mother asked sharply. Aramil knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't give up until he told her everything that had happened that night. "That evil Guild," she complained. "How could they send you out into the Docks like that?"

When his mother had finished her tirade of what she planned to do about the Guild, Aramil bid her goodnight and climbed the stairs to the first floor. A wooden panelled corridor stretched the length of the house, lined with doors. Avana had her study opposite Aramil's. He knocked on his sister's door, and opened it when she called.

Avana was lying on the sofa opposite her desk, and snapped shut her book when he entered. "I was on the verge of giving up waiting and going to bed. How did it go?"

It was clear the two were twins. They shared the same blonde hair (though Aramil's was cut much shorter) and green eyes, and they were both fairly tall.

"It could have been worse. I found the weapons, but then someone in black robes tried to stab me from behind. He was better than me, and I had to jump out of a window to escape. Unfortunately I hit the balcony below before actually managing to get into the water." Avana was obviously trying not to laugh. "It wasn't funny," said Aramil, only mock-annoyed.

"Poor Aramil. Couldn't even hit the water from a ship. Is that how you cut your arm?"

"I think so."

"Let me see," she ordered. Avana took a jar of silver powder from her desk and sprinkled some into the wound. Aramil recognized it from the countless times his sister had used it before to patch him up after various scrapes. *Ground silvermoss. It should stop any infection.* Then she placed her palm over the cut. A feeling of warmth and a pleasant tingle flowed into his arm. She took her hand away to reveal the wound just as before. Aramil knew from past experience that at present she could only speed up

his natural recovery. "There. Should be gone by the morning."

"That soon? You've improved."

"And so I should, the amount father pays out each month. With practice I can use more power, and regenerate it quicker. The qualified mages could have healed that instantly."

"How do you do it?" asked Aramil. "In layman's terms," he added quickly. It was a question he had often wondered before, but Avana had never yet been able to explain it in a way he could understand. However, last time he had asked, she had promised to think about how best to describe it.

"That old question. I think I can explain it this time. It won't be amazing detail, but I can give you a rough idea.

"To start with you'll have to imagine the power. Think of it as raw magic. It's all around us, pervading the atmosphere. Everyone generates it, to a greater or lesser extent; the difference with mages is that our training allows us to use it.

"Firstly we have to turn the raw power into whatever specific force we need, anything from *fire* to *invisible solid*. That's done mentally. We pass the power being used through the relevant pattern of thought. It's like when you hold a piece of coloured paper in front of a lamp; the light from the lamp is the raw power, and the colour is the useful force. The same as the paper turns light into colour, my mind can turn power into force.

"The hand gestures are what shape the force. They're the difference between a line of fire, a cone or a ball. Theoretically it doesn't have to be your hands, but all mages I know of have been trained to use hands, simply because it's easier. There are hand movements for every shape magic force can be used in.

"As an example, this is how I healed your arm. First I pulled a bit of power from my store of it, and then I passed it through the thought pattern that creates the *life* force used by your body. Then I directed it into your arm through my hand. Some of the force will go into the healing parts of your arm and make them work quicker. The more power I use to start with, the more force is passed into you, so the faster it will work. Unfortunately a lot of the force is wasted, as I'm not able to direct it with enough precision to specifically target the healing parts of your body. You probably felt the wasted force."

"As in the warmth and tingle? It was a nice sensation."

"That's because the other parts of your arm that received life force can't use it as well, so you just perceive it as pleasure or heat.

"So that's how the majority of magic is carried out. There are other ways, such as summoning things from other places like the Pit or magic rituals, but I won't even attempt to explain them. Just remember that what I've told you – the generation and application of force – is the

fundamental behind it all.”

“So why can’t I do any of this?” asked Aramil.

“What, aside from the fact you’re not nearly smart enough? The cerebral block, the barrier between magic and the rest of your mind. It provides the mind a limited form of protection against magic for the untrained, but prevents you from touching magic yourself. As you grow older it gets stronger. When children begin to learn magic that barrier can be broken down easily by a trained mage. After a certain age, about twelve, it gets too dangerous. The force needed to break it down would probably destroy your mind too.”

“Not good.”

“Not good at all, unless you want to be committed to Longwood. Anyway, it’s probably a good job you can’t use magic. If you can’t jump into the harbour without missing, who knows what you’d do trying to light a candle?”

“Thank you for bringing that up again.”

Avana laughed.

“Come on, be fair. It was dark and I was running away. You’d have done the same.”

“No I wouldn’t. First I’d have set him on fire, and if that didn’t work I’d have created a light to see with, and then floated down through the window.”

“Really?”

“Well, I’d have fallen more gracefully, at least,” Avana conceded.

“Anyway, you use magic every day.”

“How’s that?”

“How do you think the Grand Shaft works? It’s not a giant crane, is it? All the Shaft does is provide anyone who enters the area with a constant supply of solid but invisible force, which your controller directs into lift or slight descent. One of the earliest examples of thaumic engineering, though don’t ask me to explain how it works.”

“And where does the energy for the Grand Shaft come from?” asked Aramil.

“The same place all the city’s energy comes from - the energy that lights the higher streets and charges the skyships. I’ve really no idea. I know sometimes mages donate energy into it, but that can’t nearly account for the amount we must use. Presumably there’s some source of energy under the city, or it’s routed from somewhere else. That’s thaumic engineering, TE: the accumulation and control of power and force using objects. Or as the old duffers at the Mages Guild would call it, thaumaturgy.”

A lot of things made more sense to Aramil now. “And so enchanted items store the right kind of force?” he suggested.

“Yes, but I think you must have to bind the way in which the force is

used into the object. Otherwise your average novelty cigar lighter is no different from a flaming sword.”

“How do you do that?”

“I honestly haven’t a clue. We start enchantment next year, so hopefully I’ll be able to tell you then.”

“So next year we’ll be getting hordes of useful magic gadgets around the house, will we?”

“Maybe one or two, if you’re lucky. Do you think you understand magic now?”

“In general,” Aramil ventured.

“Well you don’t, not nearly, but I reckon you know enough now that you can stop pestering me for information.”

“Until the next time you learn something.”

Avana rolled her eyebrows. “How about a game of cards in the meantime?”

“Just the one. Do you know what time it is? Some of us have done a day’s work already tonight.”

Chapter Five

The sun was still rising as the dwarven skyship, its name the *Salamander*, left its berth in the Aviary and rose into the dawn sky. Jag stood at the stern, watching the city slip away beneath him. The crew of dwarves bustled about their various tasks, leaving him feeling like a spare part. He had already visited the engine room, where the huge magic-powered engine hummed as it propelled them through the sky, but had only found himself in the way, so now he contented himself with admiring the spectacular view.

The skyship swiftly left Dianthus behind, heading south towards the desert empire of Krakenbar. At first Jag had been confused by this course, but Captain Lysander had explained it: Axehold lay on the far side of the West Range, the mountains running along the western border of the Dianthic Empire. The *Salamander* was a relatively old skyship – one of the first commissioned for the Dwarven Air Navy, in fact – and it couldn't make sufficient height to cross the highest peaks. They would thus head for the Southern Pass, before turning north. The detour would add no more than half a day to their journey.

After around four hours in which the vegetation below became noticeably more sparse they approached the border, an artificial boundary that shifted with each year in an endless cycle of conquest and reconquest. The buildings of the few settlements in the area were shabby from their frequent involvement in the fighting, the residents having learned not to bother fully restoring them. Were it not for their importance as trading posts between the two empires they would have been abandoned long ago. Despite the proud publication of any victories across each Empire it mattered little to the residents who was in charge, and they treated both with a weary indifference.

By early afternoon they had left behind the last signs of greenery and were flying over a featureless desert wasteland, punctuated only by the odd lonely homestead or infrequent settlement. The never-changing landscape of sand soon lost its novelty, so Jag went below decks to join the dwarves in the cabin. They had already started drinking, with flagons cluttering the table. Lysander was loudly recounting the exploits of his ship and crew to Ambassador Dorjek and Lord Hogan, illustrated with violent gesticulation.

"Of course, the orcs didn't take kindly to our demolition of their idol, and we suddenly found ourselves stuck in a cave with dozens of the buggers and the entrance collapsed. Luckily my helmsman at the time used to be a miner, and had spotted a break in the rocks. One good hit with the main cannon and we brought the whole place down, and we blasted out through the collapsing roof. Got a few dents that day, didn't you?" He patted the

wall affectionately.

During the afternoon Ambassador Dorjek handed Jag a small ebony box. "From my chest of diplomatic goodies with the compliments of the Dwarven Holds. I'd rather you had this than some minor functionary who will probably leave it in its box forevermore."

Jag lifted the lid. Inside was a wonderfully crafted dagger, with a sharp steel blade and a comfortable handle wrapped in leather. "A dwarven *zerfyr*," explained Dorjek proudly. "Its minor enchantment allows it both to be used as a secondary weapon in personal combat and also to be thrown with great accuracy. It has become quite an art amongst the young of the Holds."

Jag looked at it somewhat dubiously. He'd thrown knives for sport with his friends, and knew that the balance required for a throwing knife could never be found in the sturdy weapon in his hands. Seeing his scepticism, Dorjek smiled before taking the knife and hurling it with precision into the centre of a target on the wall.

When Jag retrieved it the blade was as keen as before. He tried himself, and hit the edge of the target. Grinning, he thanked the ambassador and, remembering Dorjek's wish for it to be used, fixed it using the small sheath in the box onto his belt opposite his sabre. He would, gods willing, never need to use either weapon in anger, but the *zerfyr* was a wonderful gift nonetheless.

He sat with the dwarves until a shout came from the lookout above: Bar-Salo was in sight. They trooped out on deck to see a grey smudge on the horizon. At that distance it was impossible to define the domes and towers the Krakenbaric capital was famed for, but in this part of the desert it could be nothing else. The sight filled Jag with disgust, as it would any true Dianthic subject; the people of Krakenbar lived under an oppressive and intolerant tyrant, and were known and hated for their widespread practice of slavery. And it was of course their treachery that had launched the Old War.

Their course took them several miles north of Bar-Salo, and before long the dwarves and Lord Hogan had returned to the cabin. Jag remained at the prow, watching the sun begin to set. It wasn't dark, but twilight would be upon them within the hour. Not a cloud marred the desert sky, and the horizon was all but unbroken. It seemed to Jag as though whichever deity had been responsible for creating this landscape had somewhat rushed the job.

Over to his right and a little ahead Jag noticed a black dot in the sky. *A skyship? Probably a merchant.*

However, within a minute the dot had split into three. *Three skyships? Bit much for a merchant. Could be Kraks, I suppose. That's the last thing we need right now. Hopefully they'll just leave us alone; they've got no quarrel with*

the dwarves, after all.

The *Salamander* was a fine vessel, but three-to-one were not favourable odds. The lookout had clearly also seen the objects; he jogged down from his post on the fo'c'sle and vanished below deck.

The shapes were approaching rapidly, and by the time the crew arrived on deck they were clearly identifiable as a trio of black skyships converging on the *Salamander*. They were of a quite alien design, with pointed, spiky black hulls. Claws reached mandible-like from aft to around the prow. They bore no marking or flag, but there was something about them that made Jag shiver despite the dry heat of the desert sky.

Lysander stood on the bridge and barked orders to his crew. "Helm! Full halt. Signals! Demand identification. Weapons, deploy everything and target unidentified skyships!" Not responding, the black skyships glided ever closer.

Lysander bellowed into a steel cone across the ever-narrowing gap. "Identify yourself! Approaching craft, identify yourself or be treated as hostile." There was no response from the black skyships, which continued ominously towards them. "In Torradun's name, identify yourself!" Soundlessly the ships cruised onwards, heedless of the captain's warning. "This is your last chance; respond or we *will* open fire!"

By now they were barely a hundred yards distant, close enough to make out details on the hull, but disconcertingly there was as yet no sign of a crew. "Ambassador, I'm going to have to engage them before they get any closer," said Lysander grimly.

Dorjek nodded. "Go ahead."

The captain turned to the gunnery crew at the main cannon, a great bronze weapon sculpted to resemble the legendary beast that gave the skyship its name. "Fire!"

A stream of flame spewed forth from the cannon and raced hungrily across the short distance to the lead skyship, where it exploded into a huge fireball. The sudden conflagration left Jag sweating, blinded and gasping for air.

As soon as he recovered he saw the destruction the shot had wrought on the target. The entire fore third of the ship had been completely blasted away, leaving a smoking hulk plunging down to the sand far below. However, despite being rocked dangerously by the explosion, the two survivors continued on what seemed to be a collision course. The closer they drew without altering their velocity, the clearer it appeared that such was their intent.

"Dive!" yelled Captain Lysander in an effort to escape the impending crash. In response the helmsman plunged the *Salamander* into a steep dive, and Jag was thrown into the railing face-first, gaining a bloody lip. *Better that than not hitting the railing, I suppose.*

The two remaining black skyships followed, but made no attempt to ram. Instead one pulled up alongside the *Salamander*, keeping pace just fifteen feet away. "Who in the Pit are these fools?" asked one of the dwarves loudly.

Still the skyship drew closer, now only ten feet away. Then a line of red appeared along the hull, steadily widening as a large door swung out to reveal a red-lit room within. More worryingly, it revealed seven figures standing silhouetted on the edge. "Everyone armed!" ordered Lysander. "If they set foot on this deck then we're not letting them step off again. Captives would be appreciated, but don't take any risks. Other than that, send them back to the Pit!"

Now Lysander turned to Dorjek, Lord Hogan and Jag. "You three should get below. I'm sure we can handle this." The ambassador hefted his axe single-handedly and swung it in a figure of eight.

Lord Hogan smiled and drew a slim sabre, offering the black skyship and its passengers a mocking salute. "It's been a long time since my blade last tasted blood, but it's just as keen as at Pellon's Bridge."

Jag noticed the captain's eyes were on him now. With only the slightest flourish he drew his sword and, after a moment's consideration, the *zerfyr*. *Well, I'm not going to be the only one to sit the fighting out.*

He had only a matter of seconds – though it felt like hours, and yet was still too little – to calm his growing fear before everything kicked off. The seven figures leapt soundlessly onto the *Salamander's* deck. They all had drawn bladed quarterstaffs from within their loose robes of jet black, and their faces were covered by black metal masks.

As soon as the mysterious attackers landed they crashed into the dwarven line, staffs flashing out to find gaps in armour before their victims could swing their heavy axes. The one nearest Jag stepped over a fallen dwarf with a cut throat and turned his attention to another pair next to Jag. For a moment he froze, trying to resist the intense desire to flee to the deck below. *No. We've got to fight them now while we have the chance.*

He struck out with his sword from its side, but his foe saw the attack and parried, quickly following with a slash at Jag's neck. He desperately blocked with his new dagger, catching the quarterstaff and holding it long enough to lunge with his sabre. The robed figure leapt back, though not before Jag's blade had bitten into its stomach. It seemingly didn't notice the dwarf approaching from its other side, who felled it clearly with his axe.

This small victory heartened the dwarves who struck back furiously, bringing down another two by weight of numbers. The dwarves had two of the surviving attackers surrounded, leaving Jag standing awkwardly in reserve, while on the other side of the melee the final two duelled Lord Hogan. The old duke fought elegantly and efficiently with no more

movement than required. As Jag watched he sliced down into the leg of one of his opponents, parried the other's lunge and, ducking under the weapon, slid his blade up to cut into the dark warrior's wrist. Swiftly he moved to clinically dispatch his injured foes.

However, any feeling of victory was short lived. A shout came from Lysander on the poop deck. "To the helm! Retreat to the helm!" Though still suffering losses the dwarves outnumbered the attackers enough to be confident of success. *We'll certainly beat them if the ones on the other skyship don't... Damn! The other bloody skyship!*

Jag left the remainder of the opposition to the dwarves and sprinted up the steps at the aft. Dorjek, Lysander and three of the crew were fighting a losing battle against another six robed warriors, their backs to the stern. The seventh stood at the helm, a wooden wheel, and with a cold laugh shoved it all the way forward.

The front of the skyship seemed to drop away as the *Salamander* plunged into a steep dive. Jag was again thrown into the railing, but pulled himself to his feet and struggled up the slope towards the wheel. He was quickly intercepted by the attacker who had put the skyship into her suicide dive, and they exchanged frantic blows as it sped towards the ground. Jag caught a glancing blow on his shoulder, and gritted his teeth against the pain.

He saw he was getting nowhere and the ground was rushing closer every second. *If I don't get past this one we'll all be dead. This is no time for fencing.* Immediately following a high slash Jag kicked out into his opponent's stomach, doubling it over. While it was winded Jag snapped a kick into its face. Its mask split open and Jag had a glimpse of a pale human face before he scrambled up the deck towards the wheel.

When he was just three yards away one of the attackers broke off from killing the last few dwarves, drew a knife from its robes and hurled it straight at Jag's heart. His only option was to dive sideways, rolling badly and coming to his feet six yards from the controls.

He threw himself forwards, but knew it was too late. The ground was rearing up and the controls were sickeningly out of reach. As the *Salamander* ploughed into the ground and he slipped from consciousness, Jag realized that his quest had failed on the day it started. There would be no aid for Dianthus, and the city would fall.

It was noon, or thereabouts. That much was obvious from the heat. He was in a desert. There wasn't much else it could be described as, considering the sand as far as he could see. This admittedly wasn't far, since he seemed

to be lying beneath a curved sheet of steel.

Jag had always believed you went to the gods when you died. That was what they told you in Temple, anyway. The Great Light or the Great Darkness, the Holy City or the Pit. Never for a moment had he thought he'd spend eternity in pain stretched out in some desert. This could be some new torment dreamed up by the daemons, but he felt rather aggrieved to think he'd ended up in the Pit. Jag had tried to live a good life according to the teachings of the Dianthic Pantheon, and his last few days had seemed a ticket straight to the gods of Good. Why he should now be lying in a desert defeated him.

A desert...that was where I died, wasn't it? Or maybe... Jag lifted an arm experimentally. It hurt, but it did move. A new and radical idea came to him through the fog that filled his mind. *Maybe...maybe I'm not dead. Maybe I'm still alive!* Exhausted by this mental leap, Jag fell back into unconsciousness.

Once again Jag awoke, this time with a clearer picture of his health. He was fairly confident of being alive, and miraculously nothing seemed to be broken, although he couldn't identify a single part of him that wasn't sore. His injured shoulder was particularly painful. The main danger now though was the heat, and he was in little doubt that were it not for his shade he would be dead by now.

He looked up to see what the sheet of metal was, and groaned as he recalled the events of the day before. It was the shattered and twisted wreck of the *Salamander*, half buried in the sand. The impact had distorted the iron hull, and the wooden upper decks had disintegrated, but the once-proud skyship was still recognisable. There was other wreckage scattered around the area, but it seemed that the other skyships had exploded before they hit the ground; they would keep their secrets even now.

Those who had attacked the *Salamander* had to be more than just pirates, because no pirate would launch a suicidal attack like that. Whatever they were, they must have been utterly committed to their cause. Who had an interest in stopping the diplomatic mission? The orcs, obviously, but the black-robed men had not been orcs. And who had ever heard of orcs using skyships?

That's a question for another time, when I'm not stranded in the middle of the Krakenbaric desert. At the moment I can't have any more than an hour unless I can find some water. Time to move.

It hurt to stand up, but his thirst outweighed the pain of his bruising. He

wandered through the wreckage, not entirely sure what he was looking for. *Ah, another little miracle.* The skyship's onboard water tank had split, but some water remained cupped in a shaded fragment. *My luck's got to run out sooner or later.* The water felt wonderful, and Jag gulped down enough to slake his thirst.

After that it was time to explore the wreck. Jag began somewhat cautiously, aware that if he had survived then so could others, and not all the others on the skyship at the end had been friendly. He needn't have worried, for there were fourteen robed corpses scattered around. Sadly there were also many dwarven bodies, including Ambassador Dorjek, and also Lord Hogan. Lying surrounded by his downed foes, the hero of the Mannic Wars somehow managed to look as dignified in death as he had in life. However, to Jag's regret there was no time to bury them. He simply moved the bodies into the shelter of the largest piece of wreckage. Dorjek had a hip-flask of brandy; Jag muttered an apology before taking it, downing the last of the contents and filling it with water from the tank.

The bodies of the enemy were more intriguing, however morbid Jag's search was. All were seemingly human, albeit with skin a paler tone than any Jag had seen before, and carrying nothing but their robes and staff except for one who had something different. Something very interesting. In a pocket in his cloak there was a parchment scroll. *Oh? This could have some answers.* Carefully unrolling it, Jag read the message penned in spidery script.

Brother Grafz, you have new orders. The Plan approaches fruition, and centuries of work will soon pay off to the glory of the Master. This world will be cleansed of iniquity, and your cell has an important part to play.

Agents in Dianthus report that the Dianthic Empire is in negotiations with the Dwarven Holds. Should they succeed they will bring the full force of the Dwarven armies to bear. At this stage that cannot be allowed to happen. The above agents have given us an ideal opportunity to delay it. A diplomatic skyship leaves Dianthus on December the Third, heading for the South Pass. Intercept and destroy it at all costs. Remember, the Dawn approaches and the Master will reward those who serve Him, in life or death. Should you fail and die you will be damned forever more. Should you fail and live you will discover how much of the Pit you can experience while still alive. I therefore suggest you do not fail.

Omega

Jag read it with horror. This sounded like a cult. The *Salamander* had been brought down by fanatical cultists working for a mysterious Master. Whatever it was, this Plan didn't seem at all desirable, if they wanted to

prevent aid coming to Dianthus. It was difficult to see who stood to gain from the city's destruction, except perhaps Krakenbar, but surely even they couldn't be stupid enough to prefer orcs as their neighbours. The language suggested the Master was something more than mortal, an even more frightening prospect. *Just what are we up against?*

Jag saw he had two options. He could return to Dianthus in failure, a journey across almost the entire width of Krakenbar as well as the war-torn border. But by the time he informed the Emperor and another attempt was made it could be too late. Or, he could continue where he left off and try to reach the Dwarves on foot, presenting the Emperor's plea himself. It would probably save weeks, which could make all the difference. Didn't he owe it to the people of Rayford, and all those others in the path of the invasion? It didn't take long to reach a decision. *I'll do it. The Emperor told me to go to the Dwarves, and so I will. I've always wanted an adventure, and this is it.*

Jag was about to set off when he suddenly recalled a comment of Lord Hogan the day before the *Salamander* had left Dianthus. He returned to the makeshift mortuary and, apologising once again, removed the cloak from around Lord Hogan's shoulders. It was an unembellished piece of deep green, but Jag was not interested in its fashion value. Instead he handled the fabric until he felt the tell-tale crackle of parchment. Hogan had concealed his planned plea to the Dwarves. *More use to me than it is him.* Jag draped the cloak loosely about his shoulders and prepared to leave.

Turning from the main wreck he saw a pair of legs sticking out from under a chunk of wooden cabin. As he moved towards them one twitched, and Jag drew his sword. Carefully he took hold of the scrap and lifted it away to see who lay beneath. *Lysander!*

"Captain! Wake up!" Jag gently shook the dwarf, who grunted.

"Now what? Why can't you just let me sleep?"

"It's Jag. We've crashed!"

"Really? I hope nothing's damaged." *Sorry Captain.* Jag slapped Lysander on the cheek and the dwarf's eyes snapped open. "Jaggar?" Quickly Jag explained what had happened. "The *Salamander*...my ship..."

"I'm sure you'll get a new one. But at the moment we've more important things to worry about. Such as first of all getting out of this bloody desert, and then reaching your people."

"You're carrying on to Axehold?"

"That was always the plan. You don't want these buggers to win, do you?"

Lysander shook his head, then winced. "Do you know which way to go?"

"Uh...not really," Jag admitted.

"Luckily for you there's always my infallible sense of direction." He pointed south. "Bar-Salo is that way."

“That’s better than nothing, I suppose.”

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” asked Jag, a trace of doubt creeping into his voice.

“Of course”

“Only we’ve been going for at least three hours.”

“I tell you, Bar-Salo is directly ahead.”

“How far directly ahead?”

“Uh, four miles.”

“So we’ve come a mile over the last hour?”

“Maybe my last estimate was a bit out.”

“This one had better not be. That was the last of the water.”

“Don’t worry; Bar-Salo is famed for its fountains.”

“That’s not going to help us when we’re dehydrating a hundred miles away.”

“Have you any confidence in me whatsoever?”

“No.”

“I’m sure I’ve seen that dune before.” It was past midnight and Jag was extremely thirsty, not to mention cold. He hadn’t expected the chill of the desert night, and now pulled his cloak tightly around himself.

“Nonsense, they all look the same. Especially in this light.”

“How far now?”

“Not far.”

“*How* far?”

“A few miles.”

“*Exactly* how far?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Lysander. *Great.*

“Lysander, are we lost?”

“Not exactly.”

“And what does that mean?”

“Well, we know where we are, in the Krakenbaric Empire. And we know that if we keep going in this direction we’ll eventually get somewhere. Probably.”

“I see. So we are lost.”

“You could - uncharitably - say that.” *Never trust an infallible sense of direction.* “Wait a minute, what’s that?” The dwarf pointed to a grey

smudge on the horizon.

“Probably a mirage.” Jag was irritable from his thirst, but still had enough sense to see an opportunity of escape from the desert. “Still, it’s got to be worth a try.” Half an hour’s march brought them to the top of a high dune from where they looked out over the city of Bar-Salo.

It was the largest city in Krakenbar, and far removed from the Dianthic frontier had survived and prospered to display magnificent architecture in the Krakenbaric tradition: flat roofs for the most part, but mixed in with grand domes that drew the eye across the skyline. The city was dominated by the Emperor’s palace, hailed by many as one of the wonders of the world. It was truly spectacular, with seven domes surrounding a huge tower that thrust high into the sky. It was also the centre of one of the most oppressive regimes in the world; some said there were over a thousand slaves working in the palace alone.

“Aha! Lysander, I’ll never doubt you again. You truly are a genius!”

“What did I tell you? How do you think I became a skyship captain?” Secretly Jag felt they had arrived more by luck than by judgment, but he was too pleased at being spared a death from dehydration to make a point of it. Despite his relief there was still one point that bothered him.

“Any ideas on how we survive the city itself?” The Krakenbaric Empire was notoriously unwelcoming to unauthorized foreigners, especially from its hated foe Dianthus.

“We’ll deal with that problem when we reach it. Just keep your head down and we’ll be fine.” Jag gave in to the dwarf’s indomitable optimism and followed him down the side of the dune.

The roads into Bar-Salo were packed with merchants and the farmers who kept whatever animals they could in the desert. It was a simple matter to slip into the crowds, but as the gates approached it became painfully obvious that everyone had papers with them - papers giving them permission to enter the city. *Hm, no entry to Dianthic spies, I guess. How are we supposed to get authorisation?*

About a hundred yards from the walls Jag noticed a man travelling the opposite way. It was a trader, with all his goods in a pack on his back. He looked dejected, and Jag had a suspicion why. “What’s the matter?” he asked as the man passed. “Won’t they let you in?”

“I come all this way across this gods-forsaken desert with goods from the Provinces, spend the night in that camp full of thieves, then the pompous sods on the gate tell me I need to apply for a merchant’s pass two weeks in advance. They say this is a city of trade, but I tell you, it doesn’t do itself any favours like this.”

“No chance to get a pass on the gate then?”

“No, they just gave me some papers to fill in and told me to enjoy my time in the Westgate Mercantile Encampment. They said it would be done

in two weeks. I thought I could make my fortune in Bar-Salo, but at this rate I'll be lucky to cover my expenses – if I've got anything left to sell in a fortnight's time." Jag commiserated the merchant, frowning - but an idea was forming.

"Lysander, are they searching the wagons?"

"I don't know. Look yourself, you're taller." As far as he could see authorization was sufficient for entry, the wagons receiving the most cursory of checks that they were carrying what they were supposed to. In theory a well-hidden stowaway could enter the city unnoticed. Being seen would result in imprisonment, or more likely execution if they were thought to be spies, but it was the best chance they had. It was either that or appeal to the guards' better nature, and that was something for which the Empire of Krakenbar was not particularly well known.

Chapter Six

Stowing away was easier said than done, but eventually the chance arose to slip unnoticed inside a covered wagon before it reached the gates. A cargo of fruit boxes provided ample concealment from the opening at the rear.

The ride into the city was cramped but safe, and as they had hoped the check was somewhat less than thorough. Five minutes later the wagon drew to a halt, giving Jag and Lysander the chance to slip out before the driver began to unload.

They had arrived behind a warehouse, and dashed into an alleyway before stopping to get their bearings.

"Congratulations, Lysander. I never should have doubted you. Now we just need some supplies for the desert and then we should get out of here as soon as possible. I don't know if they check passes within the city, but I doubt we're ever going to be guests of honour here."

"I've never been here myself, but my uncle came through here a few times on trade. I don't remember much of what he said, other than that he was very impressed with the public fountains in the city centre. I think that was pretty much the only thing he did like; other than that he hated the place. I don't know about you, but I'd kill for a drink right now. It can't be hard to find a shop with desert equipment in the middle of the city either."

Jag couldn't fault the dwarf's logic. "Which way to the centre, then?"

"I think that sign is a bit of a giveaway," Lysander replied, pointing. "Five hundred yards. The language of Krakenbar wasn't far removed from Dianthus, and Jag could follow it with relative ease, only being caught out by odd words and turns of phrase.

"Well, no time like the present." Jag let Lysander lead the way into the heart of the city.

As promised there were indeed public fountains. Bar-Salo was rightly proud of them, and when they arrived many of its inhabitants were making the most of the free water supply. Jag gratefully quenched his thirst before washing his face and hair. It was hardly surprising that people came from all around to see the fountains; out in the desert water was precious, not something to be squandered. Here it was piped down from far away mountains, or so Lysander claimed.

Jag was sitting on the edge of the fountain waiting for Lysander to finish washing his beard when he noticed a pair of rough-looking city guards staring at them from a few yards away. He turned away to try to hide his sharp Dianthic features but, as he watched out of the corner of his eye, they laughed and sauntered over to the dwarf.

"What you up to, stunty?" sneered one with a thick accent. *Great: racists.*

And I thought I was the one who'd be in trouble.

"Bit of a long way from home, aren't you?" said the other. Lysander turned to face them, and the first shoved him roughly.

"We don't want any trouble," said Jag, but they ignored him. Lysander said nothing, but Jag could see he was seething with anger and trying to bite back a retort.

"Why don't you get back to your muddy hole?" taunted the first guard.

"Yeah, go back in them mountains where you belong. We don't like your type 'round here." Then the Krakenbaric soldier reached out to grab Lysander's beard, and tugged it none too gently.

In the time Jag had known him Lysander had been an exception to the dour and grumpy dwarven stereotype. He had never seen the dwarf angry - until now.

With a roar of fury Lysander hefted his axe as he leapt from the fountain. Even before he landed the weapon was swinging in a lethal arc towards the bullying guard. It would have bisected him at the waist had his friend not pulled him out of the way. *Just what we need.*

Now the guards were drawing their own weapons, fear turning to outrage and finally amusement. Soldiers rushed through the crowd from all directions; if they stayed any longer they would be trapped for sure. "Run!" Jag shouted. Lysander was in no state to hear, nevermind obey, so Jag had to force him, grabbing him by the collar and tugging sharply.

Luckily some part of Lysander realized how desperate their situation was and he turned to flee with Jag. However, the dwarf was not built for speed, and Jag was soon slowing for him to catch up - giving their pursuers time to close the gap. "Come on, faster!" It was no good, though: Lysander was sprinting his fastest. The realization hit Jag that he would soon either have to abandon his companion or be caught himself; Lysander certainly wasn't going to escape.

Having reached the edge of the plaza without being intercepted, his dilemma was solved as they entered a side-street. A brick wall stretched across their path, too high to climb, trapping them in a dead end. Jag considered turning back, but it was too late: half a dozen Krakenbaric guards had already rounded the corner and slowed to a walk, confident they had won. The most he could hope for now was that they were arrested, rather than simply executed on the spot. Not that their chances would be much better in jail. *Looks like the gods have had it in for this mission from the start. And if Krakenbar was behind the attack on the Salamander, then telling my story will only make things worse.*

"Alright then, you two. Up against the wall. Hands in the air." The sergeant ordered men to disarm them and put them in manacles. Jag's sword belt was removed, and both the sabre and *zerfyr* with it. Someone whispered to the sergeant, who nodded. "Better make this official. Stunty,

Dianthic scum, you are hereby arrested by the Guard of Krakenbar for crimes against the Sultan and his Empire. You have been witnessed in the act of assault upon a guard," he said, pointing at Lysander, before looking at Jag uncertainly. "You were probably an accomplice. Both of you, follow me."

Jag and Lysander were led through the city towards an imposing barracks of the city Guard, a functional building of thick stone with narrow windows. A pair of guards outside were puffing on foul-smelling pipes and glaring at all who passed by.

Once inside they were taken down into the prison. "You'll be tried by the Court of the City in three days," they were told. "Wait here until then." There wasn't much choice about waiting: they were shoved into a dark cell and the door was locked behind them.

At first it was impossible to see the opposite wall of the cell, but as Jag's eyes adjusted to the gloom more details revealed themselves. None of them were particularly appealing.

The cell was about ten feet by fifteen, with a roof seven feet high. All four walls were made of stone blocks and the only light came from a small barred window in the corner near the ceiling at about street level. The pile of rags in the corner was presumably intended for bedding, as nothing else had been provided.

"Well, well, well. Captain Lysander. Wasn't that clever? So much for keeping our heads down, eh?" Jag was seething with fury. "The very survival of Dianthus depends on us, so you go and lose your temper over some stupid insults and get us chucked in jail. Anyone else could just ignore the thick-headed bigots but, oh no, Lysander has to go and attack a guard. A bloody guard! In the middle of a packed plaza, for the gods' sake! What were you playing at? You're a bloody liability! I thought you knew how serious this is."

Lysander looked thoroughly ashamed of himself, accepting Jag's rant without complaint. "I'm sorry. But a grown man pulling a dwarf's beard? It's not decent! In fact, it's probably the worst insult to a dwarf's honour possible."

"To the Pit with your honour! There's more at stake here than your bloody honour. Who would you rather be in history: the dwarf who had his beard tugged, or the dwarf who doomed Dianthus to destruction by losing his temper?"

"Probably not the latter," mumbled Lysander, glowing a bright crimson, but his embarrassment was spared as the cell was suddenly filled with the sound of high-pitch singing.

*"A man and a dwarf went into a town,
Trying to save the world."*

*But then a big guard, did give them a frown,
And the dwarf, his temper unfurled."*

It wasn't immediately clear where the song was coming from, until the bundle of rags shifted. Jag had thought it too small to conceal a person, but the figure revealed would be about three feet tall standing and had a grey shade of skin. *A gnome?*

"Welcome to this fine residence in the heart of the city, styled in a very minimalist fashion. This is the home of the legendary, the celebrated, the masterful Trinkertip the bard, martyr for the freedom of poetry." *I've heard that name before, quite recently. Yes, that's it: that storyteller back in Greyhill mentioned him, at the end. Looks like his little crusade failed. "Poetry, music and tales since 605." He doesn't look forty-two, but then they do say gnomes age slower than us.*

"So how did you end up here?" asked Jag, anger forgotten in his surprise and curiosity.

"Have you not heard my woeful tale of self-sacrifice for my art? I came to this cursed city a year ago to give others the chance to express themselves through song. But the ungrateful populace had me arrested and now here I am. From what I heard I think I've got your story; was my song accurate?"

"Just about, if poetically pretty dire," replied Jag.

Trinkertip ignored the last comment. "And what should I call you?"

"I'm Jaggar Garrick, or Jag."

"You can call me a stupid fool, but normally I'm Captain Lysander of the Dwarven Air Navy. Of the late skyship *Salamander*."

"You seem to have got yourselves into a right old mess," commented Trinkertip.

"You could say that," agreed Jag.

"I do," nodded the gnome. "Do you know what will happen to you next?"

"The soldiers that arrested us said we'd be tried by the Court of the City," Jag replied.

"That sounds about right. In the Krakenbaric criminal system there are the Courts of the City for crimes in each city, Courts of the Department for more serious crimes in each of the sixteen departments and the Court of the Empire which deals with the most serious crimes. There is also the Court of the Legions, for crimes within the armed forces, and the Court of the State, supposedly for crimes within the government, though of course it is wholly without teeth.

"Your case will be heard by a local magistrate. There will be a prosecutor who can bring forward up to five witnesses but as neither of you are natives of Krakenbar you won't have the right to a defence. The magistrate will decide your guilt and your sentence. Given that he'll be

heavily biased against you, the chances of getting free are very slim. For assault on a guard you can expect at least seven years in prison. And of course they'll revoke your permit to enter the Empire, though I dare say you'll have had enough of it by then anyway."

It took a moment for Jag to absorb all this, and when he had done the idea of seven years imprisonment didn't sound too bad considering the alternative. Then something else occurred to him. "We don't actually have authorization to be in the city," he explained.

"Ah. Your chances, then, are as slim as the Sultan's dancers. First you will be found guilty of unlawful entry to Bar-Salo, sentenced to four years. After that you would need a miracle to avoid enslavement for assault on a guard. I'd get used to this kind of lifestyle if I were you. Which, of course, fortunately for me I'm not." He thought for a second. "Hang on. Would I be right in inferring from your accent that you're from the Dianthic Empire?" Jag nodded. "Ah. In that case everything I've said so far is merely academic. You're looking at public execution for spying. At a minimum."

"So essentially we're bugged," surmised Jag flatly.

"Correct. If you're still here in three days then you'll not see Dianthus again. I don't know what this quest of yours is, but it won't be going anywhere."

Jag nodded thoughtfully. "Any ideas on how we could get out of here, then?"

"With great difficulty," replied Trink flatly.

Jag closed his eyes for a couple of seconds and resisted the urge to throttle the gnome. "In what way?"

"That's a tricky one. They don't tend to encourage that sort of thing."

"Surely there's an opportunity some time. Do we ever get let outside?"

"No, not unless you get sent to the slave markets, or one of the public squares for execution. Both under full guard, of course."

"When do the guard shifts change?"

"Every two hours, but with a minute's overlap. Besides that, you may have noticed the door. It's locked, by the way."

Jag hung his head. "What do we do, then?"

"Just wait until one o'clock tonight," Trinkertip answered enigmatically.

"Why? What'll happen then?"

"You'll see. Don't get your hopes up, though, I can't promise anything."

For the first time in a while Lysander spoke up. "I got you in here, Jag, and I'll be damned if I don't get you out. If you need me to I'll willingly be a diversion."

"Nonsense, we'll all get out together," said Jag with more confidence than he felt. Already he began to doubt it. *If it comes down to it, that could be our only chance. It's essential that at least someone gets away to reach the Dwarves and warn about this cult. I don't like it either, but it's simple*

prioritising. “Come on, Trinkertip, tell us what’s happening tonight.” It appeared at first that the gnome was thinking, but after an extended silence Jag decided that he was probably asleep. “I reckon he’s got the right idea. Hopefully this is going to be an interesting night.” Jag curled up in his cloak, ready for a night on the cold, hard floor of the cells.

Jag awoke with a small grey hand clamped over his mouth. It was late at night, or early in the morning, and the moonlight streaming through the small window was almost entirely blocked by a silhouetted figure. “What’s happening?” he mumbled into Trinkertip’s hand.

“This is Bennedic, lieutenant of the Blue Army,” said the gnome, introducing the man at the window.

“Blue Army? Whose army is that? “

Bennedic answered himself in an educated Krakenbaric accent. “You could say we’re Krakenbar’s army. Only we stand for the people, not the corrupt government and tyrannical Sultan.” *Ah. Rebels. This could be our chance.* “Trink’s told me how you came to be here. You have my congratulations. You stood up to those bullies, and we’re going to get you out. The Blue Army always tries to help those unjustly imprisoned, especially if they stood against the regime.”

Jag’s heart leaped, but he still didn’t see how it could be done. “Wow. Thanks. Sorry to sound sceptical, though, but how exactly can we get out of here, even with help?”

“Be patient. You’ll find out this time tomorrow night. Until then, rest and be ready for action.”

“One thing, Bennedic,” Lysander began. “How big is this Blue Army?”

“Mainly confined to this city, but there are cells scattered around the Empire. There’s about a hundred of us active here, though there are many more sympathetic to the cause. Our ultimate goal is to overthrow the regime. Until that day we just organize protests and minor strikes against the government, like stealing weapons and supplies.”

The guard outside the door coughed, silencing Bennedic for a moment. After a moment he continued, this time in a whisper. “I should be going. One o’clock tomorrow morning, okay?” With that the lieutenant disappeared from the window, leaving Jag, Lysander and Trink with nothing but the promise of a rescue.

The next day was utterly uneventful, but aside from the gut-wrenching apprehension not as unpleasant as it could have been, since Trink kept them entertained with his stories and songs. They got on well, which was just as well given the gnome's powerful personality and love of the sound of his own voice; otherwise Jag would probably have strangled him well before the day was out. The main drawback the food, which left more than a little to be desired. Clearly the world famous Krakenbaric skill at cooking didn't extend to their prisons.

Despite the good company the day still dragged on and night seemed to take far longer to fall than it had any right to. It was impossible to precisely track the time, but Jag guessed it had to be around one o'clock at night when they heard as promised a sharp whisper at the barred window.

"Trink! Jaggar, Lysander! Up here! Are you lot ready?" Bennedic peered in.

"For what?" Lysander asked. They had discussed the escape at length and had failed to agree how it would best be achieved.

"Getting out of here," answered Bennedic shortly.

"Is there any chance of hearing the plan before we actually escape?" enquired Jag more directly.

"Patience, patience. If you're quiet for a while I'll tell you. This is going to be tough, but not the hardest jail we've ever broken. There's one weak spot we can exploit."

"Whatever's that?" asked Lysander.

"Just think. All four walls face into a secure building, but this window where I'm sitting leads straight from your cell to a back alley alongside the guardpost."

"It's a bit small, isn't it?" wondered Jag, looking up at the window. "Plus the bars somewhat complicate matters."

"It won't be by the time we're finished with it." Bennedic held out a small metallic disc about the size of his palm. "Magic explosives being set as we speak. Hardly subtle, but effective. You're not the only ones getting out tonight; we're doing the same thing to some of the other cells. Mainly political prisoners. Anyway, the confusion should be enough to get you to a safehouse.

"And after that?" Jag asked.

"I can't yet say, but you have my word you'll be out of the city within two weeks." Bennedic held up a hand to stop the protests. "After a jailbreak they always step up security on the gates, and you're not going to be able to slip out unnoticed. No, not even tonight. By the time you reached the gates they'll be locked. Can I ask how you got in? It doesn't sound like you had time to apply for a merchant's pass."

"We had to stow away on a wagon," explained Jag.

“We were dangerously close to dehydration, but luckily trusty Captain Lysander was here to save the day,” boasted the dwarf. “I found the city of Bar-Salo in all of this cursed desert. That’s dwarven naval navigation for you.” Over the course of the day his self-esteem had recovered. Bennedic disappeared from view and returned a few seconds later.

“We’re set,” he announced. “Everyone ready? Good. Listen carefully. Get over to the far side of the cell. Sit down, head between your legs, shut your eyes and cover your ears. Not yet, let me finish. As soon as the explosion goes off we’ll drop a rope through the hole. Up it as quick as you can. Remember, our advantage is surprise, so we mustn’t delay. Once you’re up follow me. It’ll be a difficult run, but not too long.”

“And if they chase us? Do we stand and fight?” asked Lysander.

“No! Keep moving at all times. If necessary we’ve got backup en route. They’ll deal with any pursuit. No more questions? Good. Then take cover. You’ve got twenty seconds.” Again the lieutenant disappeared. They took up position on the other side of the room. There was silence, and Jag sat in slightly fearful anticipation. *It must be nearly-*

The explosion ripped away the corner of the cell in a deafening roar. Stone was smashed like plaster, and chunks crashed down into the room. A shard hit Jag’s shoulder, cutting deep into his flesh and causing him to cry out. The cell was filled with a dense dust that, apart from blocking vision, was sickening to inhale. It burnt his throat before Jag thought to hold his breath.

He staggered up, walking into the rope before seeing it. Bennedic, or one of his fellow soldiers, was yelling something from above, and shouts were going up throughout the building. Blindly he pulled himself up, accidentally kicking someone below in the face. *At least that means someone’s alive.*

Finally Jag emerged from the remains of the cell and into the chaos of the street above. A pair of Imperial guards came sprinting around the corner and straight into the line of a dozen Blue Army soldiers. The revolutionaries consisted of men and women, the strong and the nimble, many different nationalities. Most were Krakenbaric humans, but there was also a strong Dianthic presence and even a dwarf. The two guards were brought down as first Trinkertip and then Lysander clambered out.

“With me!” screamed Bennedic, leading them away. The rest of the rebels prepared to hold off the Krakenbaric soldiers arriving all the time.

“What about them?” asked Jag.

“Don’t you worry about them; they’re not going to waste their lives for you,” the lieutenant assured him. “As soon as we’re away they’ll escape. The best thing you can do is run faster.”

Bennedic was leading them, as well as a few others from neighbouring cells, down a narrow alleyway. Suddenly he scrambled up some crates

onto a low roof at the back of a shop. Jag followed, and as soon as he was up saw his guide climbing a drainpipe. "Quick, we need to be on the rooftops before anyone spots us!" Jag would have acknowledged the command, but he was already out of breath. Despite that he jumped as high as possible onto the pipe, ready to pull himself up the rest of the way.

Or so he intended. In the adrenaline of the escape he had forgotten his injured shoulder, but as soon as he put his weight on it, it gave way with a stab of pain and a fresh surge of blood. Jag was left flailing in the air for a moment, clutching the pipe with his good arm. Just before dropping he felt someone grab his cloak, heaving him up onto the rooftop.

"You should have told me you were injured," Bennedic scolded him. "I could have helped." Jag just thanked the man before gritting his teeth and following him across the rooftop, trying to ignore the blood spreading across his shirt.

From then on they made their way from roof to roof. The jumps ranged from one foot to three yards, and at times they had to cross pre-placed planks across larger gaps. In places they were forced to wait for the less fit escapees to catch up. It must have been a lot harder for Trink and Lysander, being somewhat shorter, but they refused any help.

As Bennedic had promised the run was not that long, but it was still a good quarter hour since the escape began when he called it to a halt. They were crouched behind an advertising board on the roof of what seemed to be a shop. It overlooked a small courtyard surrounded by the buildings of the city. By now Jag's shoulder was very weak, and still bleeding. *Better get that cleaned up soon or I'll lose the arm. That's if I don't die of blood loss first.*

"Right," said Bennedic. "You've all done well. We're just about home now." As Jag sat panting Bennedic climbed over the small wall edging the roof, grabbing it in both hands as he lowered himself until his arms were fully extended. He then began to swing back and forth, before throwing himself forwards into the gallery overlooking the courtyard. Jag leant over the wall to see him waving. "You next," he called.

Jag grabbed the wall and put his weight on his good arm as he lowered himself over. Bennedic grabbed his feet to pull him in, and he allowed himself to drop down into the gallery.

He stood in an arcade around a small garden full of roses, with small houses and shops leading off through narrow doors. Together they helped the others down. As soon as the last person had touched the ground Bennedic was off again, leading them around the gallery before they dropped down to another, smaller, courtyard. He stopped outside a plain doorway that could easily have been the back of one of the dozens of kebab shops Jag had seen in the city.

"This is it," announced Bennedic proudly. "The headquarters of the Blue Army. Perhaps one of the most sought after places in Bar-Salo. I'm sure I

don't need to add what would happen to anyone who gave away its location." He knocked on the door. An eye appeared momentarily at a peep-hole before the door was unbolted and swung open.

"Good work, sir," said the young man inside, saluting.

"Thank you, private," replied Bennedic as he returned the salute. "Any word on the others?"

"None, sir. All news is going straight to the common room, so you'll know as soon as anyone. Besides, I think they've got you a drink down there. The general is saving the debriefing until everyone's back."

"Thanks. I guess we'll be heading that way then." Bennedic turned to the escapees. "Especially since you lot owe me a drink. Come on."

"We've done it, then," laughed Trink.

"With no little help from this Blue Army here. Thanks Bennedic, we'd never have done it without you and your friends," said Lysander.

"That's what we're here for. Still, I wouldn't mind a thank-you drink."

"You'll get one," said Jag. "Or rather more than one by the time everyone here has shown their gratitude. But first you're going to have to show us to the bar." Bennedic took them deeper into the headquarters, which extended like a rabbit warren through a row of neighbouring buildings and contained everything that an army would require. Jag glimpsed in passing a well-equipped armoury, training areas, an infirmary, a kitchen, mess halls and planning rooms. There was even accommodation for those revolutionaries who couldn't live openly in the city.

"Ah yes, we had a team blow the guardhouse armoury at the same time, so if you lost anything when you were arrested it might be worth checking out the loot," Bennedic told them on the way past the armoury.

Eventually they reached the common room, most notable for its bar. Aside from that, it was functionally furnished with wooden boxes acting as tables and stools. Here the men and women of the Blue Army relaxed, waiting for news of the night's operation. A cheer went up as they entered, followed by a toast to Bennedic. He soon had a line of drinks the length of his arm waiting in front of him, but was hardly touching them, simply sipping nervously at a brandy. As the evening continued he became increasingly agitated. Jag guessed he was worrying about his comrades who were still out on the streets.

"I'm sure they're all right," Jag told Bennedic in an attempt to cheer him up. "You said yourself that they'd fall back as soon as it looked like they were in danger."

"Not if they were surrounded, they wouldn't," the lieutenant pointed out morosely. The last thing Jag wanted was to make things worse, so he thought it better to leave Bennedic to himself and set off to find directions to the medic.

Bennedic's fears were soon proved unfounded as a jubilant squad of

Blue Army soldiers returned, having sustained no fatalities and only treatable wounds. The evening continued with their exaggerated tales of fighting. However, half an hour later a messenger arrived in the common room with an order for all officers to report for debriefing. With much grumbling they left their drinks behind, discussing the hardships of promotion.

By the time Jag returned, having received a bandage to his shoulder and instructions to avoid strain for a week, Lysander and Trink were deep in a low-stakes card game with the celebrating rebels. The game was a Krakenbaric one and quite new to him, but Trink seemed to know it well and had soon shown him how to play – though Jag suspected the gnome was not revealing everything he could have done where convenient.

The debriefing room was a comfortable place adjoining the general's chambers, with battered soft chairs in a semi-circle around a stout wooden desk. Behind this sat General Delores of the Blue Army, and lounging on the chairs were the officers that had taken part in the operation as well as the rest of the Revolutionary Council of Bar-Salo. Delores had her black hair tied back in a short pony-tail, and wore a plain and undecorated shirt and trousers.

"Thank you, my friends," she began. "It seems you managed to pull it off after all. Captain Pashkar, this was your show so would you like to report first?"

"Well ma'am, it went off better than expected." This was the first time Pashkar had directed an operation himself. He was nervous, but quickly pulled himself together. "At 0045 by the Law Square water-clock everyone was in position. At 0100 we moved out to prepare the explosives. Ma'am. We were undetected until the explosion, and as soon as the prisoners were out Lieutenant Benedic led them away while the rest of us fought rearguard against the incoming Imps. I don't know how many there were, though," he admitted worriedly.

"Only fifteen, four of which were taken out by arrows and another two up close, or so I believe," added a lieutenant.

"We gave the escapees about two minutes before we retreated as planned. After we split up Sergeant Hashek's group found their route blocked by a road block, and so took a detour via the East Slums. As far as I know this was the only deviation from the plan."

"Any casualties?" asked Delores.

"None, though five minor injuries."

“Well done, captain. We’ve had a good night.” Delores smiled warmly. “Now, Colonel Kumar, have you spoken to the escapees yet?”

The large red-faced man took a swig from the tankard he had brought with him. “Yes ma’am, in brief. All as we hoped. The merchants have between them promised us nearly a hundred gold once they get back home, and as much again in arms, equipment and supplies. One has contacts in the Provinces that could prove useful later. The Dianthic spies have promised to try to secure more support from Dianthus. Oh yes, and that ruddy gnome has made his usual promises. The late additions, a dwarf and a Dianthic human, don’t seem to have any immediate use, but according to Trink they’re on a mission important to Dianthic security. The dwarf confirms it, though he won’t go into any more detail, but I haven’t spoken to the man yet. That’s why I authorised their release – what is dangerous to Dianthus is dangerous to us, as I’m sure you’re all aware. I’ll speak to them again later.”

“Excellent. Unless anyone has any more points to raise I think that’s it,” said General Delores. The room was silent. “Congratulations. This has been a successful night. See you all at the bar.”

Chapter Seven

Avana glided smoothly to the ground from the Grand Shaft, landing lightly on the Fifteenth Level. Although it was nearly nine o'clock in the morning there were few people about in this area, and she made her way along without seeing anyone she knew.

Here the buildings were far grander than those of the docks below, grander even than the Twelfth Level, and were the domain of Dianthus's nobility and richest merchants. Although mostly large multi-level houses there was the odd shop to peer into on the way, selling expensive imports from foreign lands. As Avana progressed further she passed a few shops selling obscure alchemical and magical equipment and supplies - complicated arrangements of glass tubing competing for space with bits of plants and animals she didn't even remember reading about.

A hundred yards out from the Shaft it would be clear even to the most uninformed tourist why there were so many shops catering for wizards in the area. Thrusting up at the end of the street like a great gaudy castle rose the Dianthus Branch of the Most Venerable Society of Magical Practitioners - the Mages' Guild, as it was more commonly known.

The Dianthus Branch was not the largest or even oldest branch of the Guild. That honour belonged to Ravenstop - the half-fortress, half-mountain headquarters to the east that was nearly as old as the Empire itself. When the Mages Guild was first founded they had been refused permission to establish a guildhall in the city due to the perceived risk of magical accidents, and so had built their own stronghold out in the country. Some said they had even caused the mountain to rise up, though Avana doubted even the greatest wizards could perform such a feat.

The Dianthus Branch had been established relatively recently - just over three hundred years ago. Since then it had become the Guild's main point of interaction with the outside world and had been the school of countless city students of magic from the age of fifteen - those who could afford the hefty fees, anyway. Most children with the necessary intelligence would be apprenticed to the local wizard.

Avana, as a daughter of the Solen family, had been able to take a place there after four years with a private tutor to bring her up to the standard expected for entry. She had been to Ravenstop just three times - once, like all young mages, for registration with the Guild early on, again for matriculation into the college and most recently for the end of year feast last year. The Dianthus Branch, however, had been almost a second home over the last three years.

"Ho! Avana!" came a shout from behind her. Turning, she found her friend David - the lanky son of a noted shipbuilder - hurrying to catch up. "Hold on a minute!"

“Hi, David.”

“Hi.” The boy caught up and walked in silence for a moment as he regained his breath. “So, teleportation, eh? Should be a fun day.”

“I don’t think we actually get to teleport ourselves. That’s beyond even most of the teachers.”

“Oh.” David looked crestfallen for a second, but as usual cheered himself up quickly. “Still, maybe we’ll be able to see it done. I reckon I could pick it up.”

The pair walked on until they reached the Guild building. It was in fact several buildings, many of them extending up and down to different levels. They had been instructed to report to the Department for Translocational Studies, accessed by the Level Fifteen reception, for a day long workshop.

By the time they entered the reception hall - one of four across the different levels - they were in a loose crowd of fellow students their age who seemed to be heading for a spiral staircase in a side wall. It was not one Avana had used before, but then she had never had cause to visit this particular department. The two of them joined in the scramble to reach the stairs, along with the traditional shoving and surreptitious magic.

In the heart of the scrum Avana was almost at the stairs when she was doubled over by an invisible blow to the ribs. Standing up she saw a girl she knew only vaguely pushing past her. *Oi!* Avana emptied her mind before forming the familiar thought-pattern of *fire*. She then drew out a tiny amount of power, passed it through the mental filter and, pointing a finger at the girl, directed the force at her robes. There was a burst of smoke before her target was bent over trying to smother out the fire at her hem. Avana sniggered as she shoved past and reached the stairs herself.

There was really no point to the struggles - the lesson wouldn’t start for another ten minutes - but still the students would fight to get through. They were like any other collection of adolescents, really, only with the ability to hit each other without touching. It was even rumoured that the senior Guild mages and teachers encouraged it. After all, there was nothing like being jabbed by *invisible solid* to encourage a young mage to perfect her shield technique.

As she ascended the stairs Avana formed an *invisible solid* shield of her own to protect her from behind. *I wouldn’t put it past her to try taking my legs out.*

At the top Avana found David waiting in line outside a lecture room with Fritz and Jamish. The three seemed to be in an animated discussion of the latest magical duelling techniques.

“Avana, catch!” cried Jamish as he spotted her. The boy from Krakenbar spread his fingers and emitted a cone of *cold* - freezing the water in the air into small crystals that flew at Avana. Almost instinctively she held out her hand palm outwards and spread a shield in front of her, deflecting the

spray of ice just in time.

She shot all three boys a dirty look as they laughed, and was considering a more painful response. "You only just caught that one. If it hadn't been for the warning he'd have got you," Fritz pointed out needlessly. He was from Dunkelwald in the Provinces, and was wearing one of its customary tall hats. Without anything witty to say Avana just glared at them, and was about to try a spell to catch Jamish off guard when their lecturer arrived, walking briskly down the corridor from the stairs.

The teleportation lecturer was not a mage Avana knew by name, but she had seen him once or twice about the guildhall before now. He was well into his sixties and carried a brass-headed cane that he swung vigorously with each step.

"Get in, boys and girls, we haven't got all day," said the wizard from behind a bushy white beard. He appeared to consider this for a few seconds before correcting himself. "Actually, we have got all day, which might prove something of a disadvantage. Take your time, take your time."

The class filed in and took seats in the lecture room. It was actually more of a laboratory-cum-study, hastily cleared to admit a mismatched collection of chairs to fill the main space. "Welcome," announced the wizard, "to the Department for Translocational Studies. In effect, my office. My name is Berwick, and I have been researching the subject of translocation - or teleportation, as I believe you lot would call it - for the last forty years.

"I know through experience exactly what you will be wanting to ask me, so to save your breath I might as well answer now. Yes, I can teleport myself. And no, I will not be demonstrating. Even for one as skilled as I it is not something to be taken lightly. I was taught the skill by a wizard known as Hamish - 'the Haggis' some called him - who for as long as I had known him had used a wooden leg. He had always led me to believe he had lost the leg while duelling in his youth, but on the day I first managed to teleport myself he revealed he had actually left the limb behind one day when he tried to teleport to the bar. Nearly died of blood loss, and had a false leg for the rest of his life.

"So, on to today's fun and games. In their ineffable wisdom the Guild have decreed that in order to enjoy a rounded education you students need a knowledge of magical translocation, and that the best way to provide it is to lock you in a room with me for a day when you could otherwise be studying. I will do my best to enlighten you, but let me make one thing clear from the start: I am not here to teach you to teleport. My small department simply cannot afford the cleaning bill. And there is no point in me trying to impose the theory on you - this is a skill half intuition and half observation. The theory only really neatens it up somewhat.

"Instead I will today tell you about my own research on the subject in

the hope that you might gain some understanding from it. Some of you will find it interesting, I am sure. Those who don't will just have to put up with it.

"In case any of you really are as dull as you look I will begin with the basics: teleportation is when somebody and their immediate possessions are moved from one place to another without passing through the intervening space. Now things get more complex.

"Nearly twenty years ago a ground-breaking experiment by Hensman and Magglewich found that when teleporting from one side of the Empire to the other there is a gap of a split second between when the wizard disappears and when he reappears. Now, I am sure you bright young people will all immediately be protesting at the impossibility of this. No? Now come on, boys and girls, anyone hazard a guess why? It goes against a fundamental law of magic. Who's going to tell me which one?" Half a dozen hands were raised. "That's more like it. I see some of you *are* awake after all. Right, the boy who really should have removed his hat on entering my room, even if it is cultural. What is it?"

Fritz lowered his hand, surprised to be chosen. "Is it Horton's Law?"

"You tell me," replied Berwick evenly.

"It is?" ventured Fritz, his voice not matching the surety of the words.

"Indeed it is. For the benefit of those here who have seemingly wandered in without the benefit of six years magic education, would you explain what the Law says?"

"Um...matter cannot be created or destroyed, even temporarily."

"Exactly." Berwick clapped his hands. "And here we reach the crux of the matter. The teleporting wizard vanishes from the face of the land for a time, and yet must exist somewhere. *That* is the question: where is he?"

The class sat in silence for a while as Berwick let the problem sink in. "I don't expect an answer. This has formed my life's study, and I would hate to be put out of business by an eighteen-year-old student. At present my work focuses on trying to understand what we actually do when we teleport. Here, pass this round and take a look."

The wizard pulled a well-worn sheet of parchment from his desk and handed it to someone on the front row. It made its way slowly around the group, and when it reached Avana she realised just why everyone else had been looking so confused. She recognised the notation used to record the thought-pattern needed for particular types of force, but this one contained symbols she had never before seen, and in combinations that seemed impossible to comprehend. Avana tried to break it down into different chunks, and identified a couple of separate forces being generated, but there were many more she didn't have a clue about. It was like trying to read a random series of words.

"Obviously this is magic far beyond anything you have been taught, but

you will appreciate the complexity of what I am dealing with. Now I will outline the conclusions I have drawn from this line of study.” Berwick launched into a technical presentation of his findings, much of which went right over Avana’s head. By the time the lecture drew to a close at around three o’clock she felt more confused and less enlightened than when she had entered the room.

“Did you understand a word that man said?” asked Jamish as they made their way out of the guildhall. “He might as well have been speaking Detch half the time.”

“Did you think so? I thought it was fascinating.” Avana tried to keep a straight face as the Krakenbaric boy stared at her in shock. “Anyway, you lot, I’ve got to get home to work on my TK.” Telekinesis was a useful if difficult skill using the common *invisible solid*. The trick was in the direction and control. The students had been shown how it was done a month ago and were supposed to practice until they could place one coin on another ten feet away. Most were still trying to pick something up - anything.

“See you later,” called David as he left with the other two boys for a cafe further up the street that was popular with the young mages. In open defiance of the scratched and burned ‘No Magic’ sign many were practicing their spells over a drink.

Avana headed back to the Grand Shaft. Floating down to Twelfth Level she tried to put the lecture out of her mind and focus on how she would make the most of the rest of the day. As she wandered across the Forum she tried to hold a bean-filled ball in the air in front of her; twice before reaching the other side she had dropped it. *This isn’t going to be easy, is it? I wonder if Aramil’s finished for the day.*

Avana looked across the Forum to the Weaponsmith’s Guild, conspicuous by the smoke pouring from its tall chimneys. As she watched a well-dressed but scowling man burst through the door and marched off across the plaza. Avana hurried over to the guildhall, where she met Aramil at the entrance.

“Aramil! How’s your day been?”

“Avana.” Her brother stared after the stranger who had just left, a look of concern on his face. “That man just gone. Did you see him?”

“Yeah, grumpy-looking fellow, wasn’t he?”

“Quite. He was asking about placing a large order of weaponry with no questions asked. Wanted us to forget to file a report to the Guard. Can you follow him for me? I need to know where he’s going, but he’ll recognise me.” *He’s surely going to see my resemblance to you then.*

“Alright, as it’s you,” agreed Avana reluctantly.

“Thanks. See you back at the house.”

Without wasting any more time Avana walked swiftly but casually

across the Forum towards where the stranger, wearing a dark green coat, was turning up a street. By the time Avana had reached the edge he was a hundred feet away and she was forced to pick up her pace or else lose him in a crowd.

When she next saw the stranger he was entering a gaudily decorated smoking club at the side of the street. *Ah. Not helpful. But at least I'll be able to see who he talks to.*

As Avana stepped into the club she very nearly conjured a shield to hold back the fog of smoke, but stopped herself. A young lady would attract enough notice in there as it was, without deliberately standing out. Even so, as she breathed in the smoke she dearly wanted to magic it away from her. *Ugh, wretched stuff. Can't understand how Aramil puts up with it.*

Inside the high-ceilinged room Avana could just about make out the bar on the other side. Along the edges sat men of all ages, some with pipes, some with horns of snuff, and others with odd contraptions she could hardly guess the use of. Still, she was more interested in her quarry, who was nowhere to be seen. Taking a moment to get her bearings Avana noticed a flight of stairs opposite leading down. *Must be - there's no other way out of here.*

"I'm meeting a friend," muttered Avana in answer to the questioning looks - looks and leers.

She crossed the room and went down the steps, passing through a cloud of smoke as she did. At the bottom was a smaller room, again filled with smokers and drinkers. There was no sign of the stranger, so Avana continued further into the room. A man sat at the side inhaling pink fumes. *That's not tobacco.* At the end of the room she discovered a door and, beyond it, a side street that was presumably on Level Eleven, below where she had entered the building. *Hm, sneaky. Looks like someone doesn't want to be followed.*

Realising that her quarry could be much further ahead by now, Avana ran to the end of the street; the other way was a dead end. It opened onto a main road joining the Grand Shaft, and just visible in the crowd about half way down was the grumpy stranger. This was a busy shopping street and he would be miles away by the time Avana fought her way through. *Time for a diversion, I think.*

Grabbing a small amount of power, Avana formed the unfamiliar force of *sound*. As well as the basic thought she had to focus on the actual sound she wanted, and it took all of her concentration. When the force was in place she surreptitiously pointed a finger at a wall further back down the street and let go.

The wall emitted a piercing shriek that could just about have passed for a human scream. It was quickly echoed by several others as the crowd began to panic, most fleeing up the street away from the noise while a few

brave souls went back to see what was happening. Avana was able to jog along unimpeded and within minutes had cleared the crowd in time to see the stranger at the end of the street stepping into the Grand Shaft.

She entered the Shaft herself just as her quarry reached the top, exiting onto the Aviary. Avana used some of her own power to supplement the Shaft's own lift, and sped up to the top far faster than usual. It was risky - if she accidentally knocked herself out of the beam she would fall, not strong enough to lift her whole weight on her own - but her brother wouldn't have sent her after this man without good reason. Having gone down then up he was clearly trying to avoid pursuit, which just made Avana all the more eager to find out what he was up to. *Maybe he's something to do with those smugglers who attacked Aramil.*

Her concentration had slipped, and Avana found herself gliding dangerously close to the edge of the Shaft's force. She slowed herself and corrected her course, and by then had reached the top herself. Stepping onto the floor of the Aviary Avana was struck as always by the sheer variety of the skyships moored there. There were some from the very first days of skyships - antiques that were simply sail ships with the massive magic engines taking up most of the aft. Some even had the original sails for propulsion, relying on magic only for buoyancy. Others were truly state-of-the-art, with sleek modern hulls and small but powerful engines. These tended to belong to Dianthus's young nobility. The high cost made skyships impractical for most merchants, though there were some in use, especially for the trade with the Tastellas and the Provinces.

Avana had no time to marvel, though. The stranger she had followed up here was nowhere in sight. *No problem.* Avana closed her eyes and emptied her mind, as though she were reaching for power. She could see in her mind the magic all around. The Grand Shaft behind her was an almost blinding glow, and there were other hotspots where skyships were docked, but she was looking for something far more subtle. *Aha!* A thin streak of magic stretched out from the glow of the Shaft, fading even as she felt it. It reminded her of a smear from a big ink spill. *That's got to be him. There was no-one else on the Shaft.*

Snapping out of the trance she jogged off in the direction of the magic streak. Anyone using the Shaft would leave a temporary trail of magic as they landed, as surely as if the force had been their own. *It's a start, at least. But I still don't know where he went after that.*

The path she took wound gradually upwards around the ring that was the upper level of Dianthus. There seemed to be fewer military skyships about. Of course, most of the fleet was based at Beacon Hill, but there were usually a few smaller craft about. *Maybe they're out on exercises.*

Avana next caught sight of her quarry about a hundred and fifty yards further along the road. He was standing on the raised gantry besides a

battered old skyship, surely more than twenty years old. *No common smuggler has a skyship. Pit, not even one like that.*

As she watched a dark figure came up on deck and dropped a plank over to the gantry. The well-dressed stranger strode across and disappeared below decks. *Looks like that's as far as I'm getting.* Not for the first time Avana wished she could make herself invisible. Some of the greatest mages could, but it was magic far beyond her capabilities. Something to do with bending light, apparently.

Never mind. Where magic fails, there's always good old common sense. One of her teachers said that a lot, and it was as true here as always. *Berth G-Seventeen.* She simply had to check the records.

A quick trip to the Aviary harbourmaster's office revealed that berth G-Seventeen was currently being rented by a Captain O Last. At least she had a name to go on. *Time to get back to Aramil. Maybe it'll mean something to him.*

Applause erupted from the audience as the tenor finished his song. The curtains fell and lamps were lit as the Dianthic Imperial Opera paused for the interval.

"Well, I can't honestly say I followed that," said Avana in the Solen box, watching people below filing out towards the privies. Lady Solen stood up to join them. "Nice tunes, but I don't know why they can't sing in Dianthic like everyone else."

"Well, if you'd bothered to read the programme..." Aramil said, waving a sheet of parchment.

"Maybe I would have if you hadn't had your nose stuck in it."

"Because it would have been too much to ask for it, wouldn't it?" Avana stuck her tongue out at her brother. "So, any more ideas on our nasty man today?"

"I still think he's something to do with those smugglers you...*investigated.*" She grinned.

"I'm starting to think you might be right. There's definitely something fishy going on here."

"Very exciting, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it that. You weren't the one being attacked."

"Well, if you will go swimming in the docks..." she chided him.

"Thank you. I'll remember all this the next time the Guild want me to single-handedly seize the docks. Do you want me to volunteer you?"

"Ooh, yes please. But what about the name - O Last? Any thoughts?"

"I still don't think I've heard it before. I'll try pulling a few family strings in the Watch tomorrow to check the records, but he didn't strike me as a

criminal. Well, not a known criminal, anyway. It's probably not even a real name. I'm more concerned about why they're bringing so many weapons into Dianthus. There was far more there than the city market can support, and if they're willing to destroy a whole shipload then there must be plenty more out there."

"They might not all be for Dianthus, surely?"

"Why else bring them in? This is the hardest place to land contraband, for what that's worth. You could dock anywhere on the Ray for far less trouble. It makes no sense unless someone wants those weapons in the city."

"You don't mean a coup or something, do you?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But the Guild knows, and it's their choice where to take this. There's no need to worry mother with all this excitement," he added in a whisper as the box door opened.

"Pass the programme, would you, Aramil," said Lady Solen. "Thank you. I never can understand these foreign pieces."

Chapter Eight

The next few days passed swiftly. Jag, Lysander and Trink were caught up in military life, helping out wherever they could. Jag had been delighted to be able to retrieve his *zerfyr* from the armoury, as it had been snatched in the raid along with anything else of value. His sword was too plain to have been recovered, but the Blue Army was able to provide him with a comparable substitute.

It seemed that the Blue Army was in preparation for another operation, but not their escape from the city. On the fourth day after the escape Jag asked Bennedic what was going on, as he walked past Jag's makeshift cobbler's workshop.

"I don't suppose telling you will do any harm. We're ambushing an Imp supply caravan on its way through the city. This'll be our biggest operation for several months, and nearly everyone's involved in some way."

Jag felt he owed the Blue Army something. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked.

"You're doing a grand job here," replied the lieutenant, gesturing to the stack of footwear in the corner.

"Thanks, but I wasn't talking about mending boots. Can I help in the battle?"

"Who mentioned a battle? It should be a quick, clean raid."

"You must be planning on the chance of fighting. I doubt the Empire is going to leave the caravan unguarded."

"Okay, so there might well be fighting. But we're not going to put you on the front line. What about your diplomatic mission? It's in our interests to stop Dianthus being invaded. First, Krakenbar would move in to take advantage of the situation, leading to more war and - assuming we survive - an enlarged empire for our beloved sovereign to tyrannise. Second, I don't particularly fancy orcs as neighbours, myself." *He does have a point, I suppose.*

Jag nodded acceptingly. "Still, there must be some part I can play. Ranged support, perhaps? I can shoot a bow well enough."

"We've got plenty of archers already. Anyway, it's not my place to say. This operation is under the direct control of General Delores. If you want to ask, you can speak to her."

"I will. And I'll see if Trink and Lysander want to help, as well."

They did. The three stood in Delores's office and made their request. "Any help would come in handy," she admitted. "Any good at archery?"

"I'm a dead shot with a bow," boasted Trink. "Bar-Sanda Tourney archery champion 638. Once I took down a flying razorhawk at nearly a thousand yards."

Jag thought for a second. "I've fired bows all right before. Second place in

the Rayford Young Militia fifty yards, Kingsfest 645. I shot a rabbit once. It may have been lame," he added as an afterthought.

Lysander grinned. "I prefer my axe, or better yet a Harnfallers Firetongue IV mounted on sixty feet of iron skyship, but I'm no slouch at archery myself."

Delores smiled at them. "As it happens I could use some extra archers. It's not vital, but it would be helpful. We're trapping the convoy in the Imperial Arches, the gateway to the government district. There will almost certainly be one or more wagons of soldiers travelling with the caravan. We've decided to have someone in an overlooking tower to put a flaming arrow into any military wagons as they pass - it should cause chaos, or at least a distraction. You'd be perfectly safe up there, and there's plenty of cover if anyone notices. I've got archers assigned to the job, but if you three are willing to take over then that would free them up for the frontline. What do you think?"

"I'd be happy to," said Trink. "And I think I speak for the three of us." Jag and Lysander nodded their agreement.

"Good," said Delores, pleased. "Grab some bows from the armoury, and come along to the briefing on Friday after dinner. Any questions now?"

"Won't we be recognized on the streets?" asked Jag.

"No, the gatekeepers will know about you but I doubt the rest of the Guard will. You'll be fine."

"In that case I'd love to help," said Jag. "I owe you, after all." The others were also quick to agree.

"Excellent. Our struggle always needs volunteers. See you Friday."

"Triangle squad in position."

"Diamond ready."

"Square's ready and waiting." Spotters throughout the tower reported on each unit, and a young woman tracked the operation on a small map of the area.

"Circle?" she called out.

"They're just going down Sceptre Walk, should be there in half a minute."

"Eye One?" she checked next.

The observer stuck his head around the corner of the stairs. "Convoy passed the Jennic Emporium a minute ago. We've got five wagons of goods, two guarding and a vanguard of seven men."

"How far forward?"

"Six, seven yards."

“Good. Eye Two?”

“Passing now. Must be a good six yards gap before the supply wagons. Need the specs?”

“No, we’re good. Eye Three?”

“Imperial Road clear of any military presence. The Arches are all up, and no signs of unexpected security.”

“Keep a lookout and speak up the moment something looks odd.” The woman stood up, her map up-to-date. “General, everything’s as planned. You heard the reports. May we proceed?”

“Go ahead.” General Delores had been directing the Blue Army’s actions in Bar-Salo for six years now, but even so she was always nervous when lives were at stake. Her time on the front line had given her a close empathy with the men and women she sent into combat, and her commitment to their survival had led to a quick rise through the ranks. *From now on this is in the hands of the gods.*

“So the soldier was starting to smell a rat, and when we couldn’t give a good reason for wanting to bring three wagons of weaponry into the city he threatened to call in the city watch.” Trink illustrated his story with dramatic flourishes as he, Jag and Lysander sat in a tower next to the Imperial Arches, bows at their sides and arrows already specially prepared with pitch lying beside a lit torch. “As if it wasn’t bad enough already the guard didn’t react well to my offer of silver. To cut a long story slightly shorter we ended up trapped in the wagons with a squad of Krakenbaric soldiers closing in. It was only my quick thinking that got us away: I tied a rope to a wagon and threw one end over a beam of the gatehouse roof. I then sent the wagon straight through the Imps; as well as scattering the soldiers it pulled us up into the air and let us jump the wall into the city. It cost me three wagons and I shudder to think how much the goods added up to, but we lived to fight another day.”

“You mean they actually allowed you to keep fighting?” muttered Lysander under his breath.

“And most people think you’re just a storyteller and musician. In fact the great bard Trinkertip is actually an arms smuggler for Krakenbaric revolutionaries,” said Jag. “If not a particularly successful one.”

“A truly multi-talented gnome,” said Lysander with almost a straight face. The three of them were waiting for the convoy, and once again it was Trink’s wild stories that held off boredom and anxiety.

“It was after that I fell in with the Blue Army, lending them the benefit of my experience.”

“So was that how you came to be in jail when we met you?” asked Lysander curiously.

“Uh – not exactly,” replied Trink. “That was probably more directly linked to my performance of ‘Sandy the Carpenter’ on the Palace steps. With dulcimer, as well.” He sighed melodramatically. “I tell you, this is no city for a poet.”

“Ah well. The Kraks may have something of a point there.” Jag sucked his lips in thought. “I don’t know how to put this gently, but that excuse for a poem you greeted us with was awful. Whatever happened to the Trinkertip who wrote *The Masters of Stone*?”

“That blasted poem took me ages, and not just the research at Axehold. I never have been able to make them up on the spot, and when I do try I invariably end up regretting it. Did you really think it terrible?”

“Yes,” Jag and Lysander told him immediately and emphatically.

“Oh.” While Trink was thinking, his mutterings sounding suspiciously like a reworking of his latest poem, Jag headed up to the roof to check for the convoy. Like most buildings in Krakenbar, there being no worry of snow, it made the most of the flat roof by having an extra level on top with a trapdoor for access and a waist high wall for safety.

It can’t be long now. Their tower stood between the two Arches chosen for the ambush, giving them a good clear shot. It was only a few minutes before the first wagon rolled into sight further up Imperial Road. He called his friends, who rushed up with their bows and the torch to crouch under the cover of the wall.

“Fifty yards,” whispered Lysander, peering over. Then, after a while, “twenty.” The vanguard finally passed the first Arch, followed by the wagons themselves. Jag waited expectantly for the trap to be sprung, for the gates to close, but the convoy continued to advance unobstructed. *What if they didn’t get past the guards on duty and never reached the controls?* Then, quiet compared to the badly maintained gates of Rayford, the portcullises began to fall, trapping the vanguard on one side and the wagons on their own behind. *Aha!*

“And that’s our cue,” announced Jag, lighting his arrow and taking aim. Trink and Lysander had done the same, and three streaks of flame sped from the tower. Each embedded itself in the side of a wagon and let off a cloud of black smoke. “That’s us done. It’s all down to the soldiers now; we’ve just got to keep our heads down until it’s over.”

“You won’t have to worry about your heads much longer. Turn around.” A voice with a strong Krakenbaric accent came from behind them. Jag turned, drawing his sword halfway but returning it when he saw the six crossbows levelled at them. He chose instead to curse, as did Lysander. Even Trink spat an obscenity that would have shocked his fans. “Ah, a man, a dwarf and a gnome. Not the most common of partnerships. The Sultan is

most displeased that you have insulted his hospitality, and is anxious to make sure you grow to appreciate it. Unless he simply executes you of course, which wouldn't surprise me in the slightest, especially considering your little display just now."

"Shouldn't you be helping out down there?" tried Jag, gesturing to the chaos that was erupting below.

"No need. A whole regiment of the Sultan's finest is lying in wait for that rabble. Do you seriously think such a valuable cargo would drive through such a vulnerable spot guarded by just twenty-one men? Evidently your friends did." Horrified, Jag tried to see the battle below while keeping his face to the soldiers. "Go on, take a look. Witness a fatal blow to the so-called Blue Army. See how they fare against real soldiers."

Dreading what he would see, Jag did as he was told. Heavily-armoured Imperial troops were pouring out of the buildings at the side of the road, charging into the outnumbered rebels who had been waiting on the rooftops unaware of the danger beneath their feet. In their midst flew a standard bearing a gold dragon on a crimson background: the Sultan of Krakenbar's personal arms. The Blue Army was fighting bravely, but they were no match for the highly trained and experienced elite of the Sultan's own regiment.

Already some rebels were fleeing into the nearby buildings, aided by the fact that their pursuers were slowed by heavy armour. However, those who stayed were fast being surrounded by the Krakenbaric soldiers still flooding into the street.

Jag was spared the sight of the continuing massacre by a soldier pulling him roughly away, reminding him of how little better his own situation was. He forced himself to think clearly. *Sooner or later they're going to kill us, so we escape before then. But until that opportunity arises it's probably best to avoid giving them a reason to cut out the fuss and execute us here and now.*

"You must be mistaken: we've never been to jail." Trink tried his hardest to look innocent.

"Who mentioned jail? Guilty mind? Besides, you've just caused damage to military equipment, most likely in conjunction with a terrorist attack. I make that insurrection. That's more than enough for the death sentence in the Emperor's books. The way I see it you've got a choice between a nice easy decapitation or the hard, painful way - a crossbow bolt in the back. I'm sure you understand."

With no other options the three were led at crossbow point out of the tower and down a side-street. Ahead rose the gleaming domes of the Palace and with a growing foreboding Jag realised their destination.

Sure enough, a ten minute march through the streets of Bar-Salo took them to an outer gate to the palace grounds. These were surrounded by a stone wall thirty feet high and heavily fortified; even if the city itself was

breached the palace could act as a citadel with a good chance of withstanding a siege.

Beyond the outer wall were the palace gardens. Together with the glass roofs, harem and the Sultan's Chapel, this was famed throughout the world, not just due to the beauty but also the diversity of the plants within. Acres of flowers and trees on painstakingly landscaped ground surrounded the palace, recreating styles from distant lands through careful horticulture and hugely expensive irrigation. Still, they were but a setting for the palace itself.

The palace of Krakenbar was a truly spectacular building. According to legend it had been built for the first Sultan by ten thousand slaves to a design stolen from the gods themselves. It was said that, on seeing it for the first time, the great philosopher Lucasian begged to be enslaved in order to spend his life within such beauty. Many believed that the building itself contained at least five hundred rooms, and that it extended underground further than anyone knew. Judging by the size of the palace, that was not such a liberal estimate.

Jag was interested in the building, but only from the point of view of escaping. He certainly had no desire to spend the rest of his life there, a possibility that grew more likely with every step they took. Once they were inside there would be very little chance of a break for freedom. Unfortunately no opportunities were presenting themselves, and so with no better plan Jag was beginning to consider having to simply turn and run. Even allowing for the the advantage of surprise, with six loaded crossbows aiming at them that would essentially be suicide.

The palace was looming worryingly close above the tree line when an opportunity finally presented itself. It was a long shot, but better than the alternative. *This may well be the best chance we get.* Their route took them across an artificial river by means of a narrow stone bridge. The guards had quite sensibly sent three of their number across to stop them running off the end, but there was one way out they hadn't considered.

Halfway across came his time to act. Muttering a prayer to Dianne, Jag grabbed both his friends and threw himself off the bridge.

They plunged through the water, warm from the desert sun and fortunately quite deep, and Jag let go of the others. He hoped Lysander and Trink could see where he was going, and rather belatedly that they could actually swim.

A crossbow bolt cut through the churning water in front of him, a not-unexpected danger. In the confusion it was impossible to tell whether the others had fired as well. Jag briefly surfaced to get his bearings. He was, as he had hoped, directly under the bridge. There was no sign of his companions.

Under the bridge he was safe for the moment, but only until the soldiers

moved to the shore where they would have a clear shot at him as soon as they had reloaded. Jag ducked back under the water and swam as far as his breath would allow, surfacing again a few feet from the shore and further downriver. The other two were splashing around further up. "Trink! Lysander!" he called, knowing there was little use in secrecy. "Out of the water! We need to lose them in the gardens."

As soon as they could stand they sprinted for the shore. The soldiers saw what they were doing and opened fire as soon as they had reloaded. The bolts hissed past all around, one scratching Lysander's scalp and causing him to swear heartily.

Ten yards or so away from the shoreline began a cluster of ruined buildings. They had been built that way by some forgotten Sultan, and now they provided shelter for the fugitives. Jag led the way at a crouched run. Dodging around the debris they soon began to gain a good lead on the armoured soldiers, and within four minutes they had lost their pursuers amidst the dense trees and ruins of the garden. *Safe - for the moment.*

They were regaining their breath when Lysander gestured for them to be quiet. "Over there," pointed the dwarf. "Through the hole in the wall. It's those pekking Pit-spawn that attacked the *Salamander!* What in the Pit are they doing here?" Sure enough, a trio of the black-masked and robed cultists were sitting on a ruin, talking amongst themselves. When Trink saw them he shrank back in fear.

"Dark Acolytes!" he whispered.

"You know them?" Jag asked, curious.

"That's what we called them, anyway. I was in a small town library out in Dormens, when about a half dozen of them burst in and started killing people. I mean, they looked the same, anyway. I made it out, just, but they burned the place to the ground. Guards never caught them, as far as I know. We assumed it was some weird cult."

"Can you hear what they're saying?" asked Jag.

Trink cocked his head, listening. "Yeah, I think they're speaking Malkovari."

Lysander frowned. "Really?"

"Yeah, I'm sure of it," Trink nodded. "Never thought I'd hear it spoken for real, but as it happens I learned it when I was researching *Captive of the Daemon-Worshippers* twenty years back." Jag frowned. Malkovar was the name given to the land to the east of the Mawlund, a dark forest blighted by daemons and dark magics. It wasn't meant to be a very friendly place.

Trink listened for nearly five minutes, frowning. "Alright. From what they're saying they're negotiating with the Sultan on behalf of their boss. They call him Omega. That's a Malkovari letter, in case you didn't know - last letter of their alphabet. It's not quite clear what the talks were about, but it sounds like the Sultan was quite agreeable, and I doubt it bodes

well.”

Jag cursed again - something that that been happening far too often over the last few days. “Even more reason to get out of here and let someone know. We should be moving.”

“Yes. I did have an idea, actually,” said Trink. “Have either of you read or heard the stories of Redfahr? No? Really? Well it starts... No, I’ll save it for another time. The relevant point is that the hero, Redfahr, gets himself into the same situation as us. Stuck in the palace of Bar-Salo’s gardens, that is. He escapes through the palace canals.”

“The what?”

“The palace canals. The Emperor wants a steady supply of water for himself, so all the water pumped into Bar-Salo goes first to the palace. Then any surplus water can be distributed, by way of the canals, to the rest of the city. If we can find an entrance to the canals we should be able to walk straight out. And I think I know one.”

“Where’s that?” Jag asked, smiling.

“I should imagine the Bluebell Temple would have one. It’s essentially just a glorified set of baths for the Emperor’s personal use. If what I’ve heard is correct then it should be that way.” He pointed across the gardens.

“I don’t know whether you actually know that or you’re just making it up,” began Lysander, “but it beats sitting here all day. Come on.”

They set off at a light jog in the direction Trink had indicated, and before long had arrived at the temple. As Trink had said there was little religious about it. It was a small building, in the same style as the ruins throughout the gardens but intact. It was also unguarded – after all, it was impossible to penetrate the palace compound, and what intruder would be so brazen as to pay a visit to the Emperor’s own bathhouse?

Inside, arches led off from the atrium to different pools: the main warm pool, but also cold, cool, and hot ones to the side along with saunas. However, Trink made straight for the only door, which led down into the maintenance room.

Inside shelves of scents and chemicals lined the walls, while stairs led down to the boiler room where they stopped next to a trapdoor set into the floor. The trapdoor was locked, but it proved a simple matter to break through. When it was open they could see down through the hole, where the dim light of the room glittered from flowing water. Jag led the way down the rickety ladder, taking the torch from the wall and striking it alight.

The water was only knee deep, but the current was fast enough to make it hard for him to keep his balance. The tunnel through which the canal flowed was twelve feet wide and seven high, lit only by the flickering torch. In one direction Jag could dimly make out machinery that may have

been the pumps for the baths, and in the other, in the direction of the flow, it ended at a junction.

"Has anyone got any idea of direction?" asked Jag. "I don't suppose the canals are signposted."

Lysander grinned. "Easy. Just think yourself lucky you've got a dwarf with you. Follow me." Between Lysander's sense of direction and Trink's knowledge of the city they eventually managed to agree on a route back towards the Blue Army headquarters.

By Lysander's estimation they were leaving the palace compound when they heard something splashing towards them from around the corner.

They froze, but there was nowhere to hide. What emerged around the corner didn't seem like a threat, though Jag couldn't quite classify it. It could only be described as a boat, but it had seemingly been cobbled together from scrap, and it didn't look like it had any right to float. A large lantern hanging from the prow lit up the tunnel and allowed Jag to make out details of the flat-bottomed vessel. Only fifteen feet long and five wide, it was being rowed by a roughly dressed Krakenbaric man. As soon as he saw the three wading towards him, he hailed them warmly.

"Well met, travellers. Zars Malah at your service, a canal tramper and proud of it. Would you be wanting a lift?"

"A lift? Where to?" asked Lysander, taken aback by the strange man and his curious craft.

"Anywhere in the canal system for two coppers, trips into the sewers for four. Quick and dry transport with no questions asked."

"Hm. Is there an exit in Lamb Lane?" asked Trink.

"No," replied Zars. "But I can get you to an alley at the top of Dogways."

"I think we might just agree to that," said Trink. "What do you two think?" They both nodded and paid their fare.

"We're lucky to have found you," said Jag.

"You'd have met another like me. There's whole families of us down here, safe from the Sultan's grasp." Zars began to pole his motley craft down the tunnel.

"There can't be much demand for this down here, can there?" Jag asked.

"You'd be surprised at the number of people hoping for discreet transport through the city."

"And the government doesn't mind?" asked Lysander.

"We're too useful. I don't personally like helping the Empire, but down here every fare counts so you can't afford to be too choosy. Whether it's secret movement through the city or just information, even Imperial agents sometimes pay us a visit."

A while later they passed another canal tramper's boat, then more and more as the journey continued, each cobbled together in its own way.

Soon they pulled up in a side tunnel. Holes in the roof allowed water to

be drawn up, and a hatch was set directly above them.

“Here you go,” said Zars proudly. “The trapdoor will take you into a little hut just off Dogways. I hope you enjoyed your journey, and that I’ll see you again in the future. Remember, if you’re down here again look out for Zars Malah.”

They thanked their guide before climbing up the ladder and out onto the street. As Zars had promised they were in a small wooden hut, filled with various tools for the maintenance of the water supply.

“Well I never,” said Lysander. “What were the odds of us escaping that?”

“Don’t speak too soon,” cautioned Jag. “We’re not home yet, and now we’re wanted not only for assault and jailbreak but insurrection too. Don’t let your guard down. Still, not far now. I take it you do know the way from here, Trink?”

“Easily. Follow me.”

They emerged into a dingy back alley running into quite a busy thoroughfare. Trink was leading them around the corner into Dogways when they almost bumped into a guard walking briskly down the street.

“Afternoon,” he said in greeting. “You three don’t look like you’re from round here. Can I be seeing your passes?”

Trink looked over his shoulder down the alley. It was a dead end, blocked by a high wall. “This could be a problem,” he observed.

The guard sighed. “Don’t tell me. You haven’t got them with you.” They shook their heads sheepishly. “Properly I should be dragging the three of you back to barracks for questioning. But believe it or not I didn’t join the Guard to persecute foreigners. I suggest you head straight home and make sure you always carry it in the future, or if - as I suspect - you don’t actually have one, you see about applying damn sharpish. I might be willing to turn a blind eye, but I can’t say the same for some of my colleagues.”

Suitably chastened, they thanked the man for his discretion before heading along the street towards the Blue Army headquarters. Lysander let out his breath with a sigh. “I can’t work out whether today has been very unlucky, or just very lucky indeed.”

“Given that we’re still alive, I’d be happy to mark it down as good fortune,” said Jag.

Trink frowned. “I’m going to reserve judgement until we know how the Blue Army fared.”

Chapter Nine

“Right,” said Dolores crisply when all were present. “Time to get you all out of this gods-forsaken city.”

The six men and two women who had been broken out of jail nearly two weeks ago sat in the briefing room with a selection of the Blue Army officers, some of whom still bore signs of injury from the recent ambush.

The revolutionaries had suffered in the attack, but much less than Jag had feared. The Imperial soldiers might have been well-armed and armoured, but this only served to hold them back once the rebels escaped back to the rooftops. Jag was pleased to see that Bennedic had got away, as had most of the others he had met during his time with the Army. Still, the atmosphere amongst the survivors was sombre.

Despite the setback they were still willing to go ahead with the escape from the city. Jag had no idea what exactly they were planning, but still had full confidence in their abilities.

“So here’s the plan.” Dolores’s gaze took in each of them in turn. “In three days’ time a group of performers is booked to present a play in the Westgate Street Public Theatre. That group will consist of chosen members of the Blue Army. You,” - she gestured to the escapees - “will be concealed within wagons adjacent to the theatre, and there will be other wagons making their way towards the gate.

“At this point, as part of the performance, a large quantity of smoke will be emitted from the stage and wafted down the street towards the gatehouse, enough to fill the tunnel leading through the wall. This will allow you to slip through before they think to close the gate, and hide in one of the wagons outside that has already been searched, marked Ackbar Iron. It will carry you away to some friends of ours who can get you out of the desert and to the Dianthic border. Any questions?”

“Uh, yeah.” Trink raised a hand. “What do we do if something goes wrong? If there isn’t enough smoke, or they close the gate before we get there?”

Dolores nodded. “Good point. If things don’t go as planned just sit tight. If you’re already exposed then we’ve got a team in place to get you out of trouble.”

She smiled at them. “It’ll be tight, but there’s no reason you shouldn’t make it. Every one of you has been worth rescuing, and I’m sure you’ll do your best for us when you’re out. Goodbye and good luck. Oh, and do try to keep out of trouble in the future.”

Two days later the operation swung into action. The stage was being set up in the Public Theatre, a colourful wooden construction behind which were presently concealed large fans. Jag and the rest of the fugitives loaded backpacks with enough supplies to get them out of the desert and entered a wagon to ride across to Westgate Street.

As the morning drew on and the day grew hotter the back of the wagon became stuffy, but they dare not step outside for air, or even open the canvas flaps. They couldn't speak for fear of giving themselves away, and Jag for one was both bored and nervous when they heard the first sounds of the performance from across the street. Everyone's ears pricked up, and Jag put his eye to a small slit in the side of the wagon through which he could observe the gatehouse.

Though he had been hastily briefed on the story of the play (a fairly unremarkable version of a popular myth) it was difficult for Jag to follow from this angle. Still, there was no mistaking the black cloud of smoke that spilled from the stage and was rapidly carried down the street to engulf the gatehouse.

"Time to go!" he whispered before slipping out the back of the wagon into the smoke-filled street. *Oh, pekk.* The gate tunnel in front of him was blocked by a large wagon, and he could hear the sound of a rapidly escalating argument between driver and gatekeeper. *We're not getting through that way.*

He looked back to see the others clambering down from their place of concealment. They should just hide and abort the escape, if the plan was to be followed, but then they might be stuck in this city for weeks. Instead he found his eyes drawn to the second gateway ten yards further along. It was equally filled with smoke and would provide an equally good means of escape.

"Slight diversion," he whispered as he led the way at a run across the street.

The figure of an armoured guard loomed out of the smoke ahead; his back was turned to the passing fugitives but he would surely notice them as they passed. Barely feet away, Jag drew his sword and prepared to strike, but stopped himself at the last moment. Whatever the Blue Army might say, the fact this man worked for the Empire didn't mean he deserved death. His last encounter with an Imperial soldier was proof of that. Still, the man had to be dealt with one way or the other.

Apologising under his breath, Jag shifted his grip and brought the pommel down on the back of the man's head. The guard collapsed and he jogged past and into the tunnel, hoping they would be sufficiently concealed.

He emerged on the other side of the wall clear of the smoke and feeling exposed. Fortunately there was no one watching on this side, and it was an

easy matter to make his way into the Ackbar Iron wagon parked further along the wall.

Within the minute all of the escapees were sitting in the back of the getaway vehicle, clear expressions of relief on their faces as the wagon rumbled into motion. They were away.

It was not until many miles further on that Jag truly allowed himself to relax and accept that they were not being pursued. When he stuck his head out from under the flap he saw they had left the road and were driving across open desert, featureless and without noticeable variation.

It was well into the evening when they finally pulled to a halt. Through the opening at the back Jag could see the glow of fires. *A camp? They really have thought of everything.* The newly freed prisoners climbed shivering out into the cold night air, glad to be out of the cramped vehicle.

Seven large bonfires illuminated a cluster of white tents of various sizes. Jag went to find the driver, who was already out. The man had skin tanned darker than was usual in Bar-Salo and wore loose white robes, as did the others at the camp who were now approaching the wagon. Jag knew it to be the traditional dress for Krakenbar, but these days it was regarded by most as an inconvenience unnecessary for city life.

"Thanks for the ride," said Jag. The man nodded his head appreciatively. "I'm Jag. That was some good driving there. There's no way I could navigate off-road like that, not without any real landmarks. You must know this area well."

"I do, like the back of my hand. As do the rest of my tribe. My name is Kersi Al-Bar." *Tribe? I didn't know any Krakenbars lived in tribes.*

"I'm sorry, but I'm not familiar with your people."

Kersi smiled ruefully. "Alas, few are nowadays. We are the Al-Bar, one of the last remaining tribes living as nomads within the land of Krakenbar. Once we ruled this desert, but many years ago we were overthrown and cast out from this new society. I can tell you our story if you like; we have plenty of time."

"Go on; this sounds interesting." Kersi led him over to one of the fires and they sat down.

"More than three hundred years ago the men of this desert lived as we do now: as nomadic tribes living on a subsistence basis. The Al-Bar were the governing tribe, and our magi taught that only through shunning settlement could we avoid any one tribe taking control of the water. For in the desert water was both power and wealth, and it was thought better that the oases be open to all.

“But there came from amongst the tribes a man of silver tongue, whose speeches caught the ear of many. He preached that by building cities we would grow powerful, and that a powerful Sultan would be able to rule for the people and ensure that all were treated alike. Followers flocked to his banner from every tribe, and when he had amassed sufficient support he struck.

“The rebels assassinated the tribe leaders in one night. By the morning they had seized power, and they brought most of the other tribes under their rule, while the Al-Bar and other tribes who resisted fled into exile in the desert. The chief rebel proclaimed himself Sultan of the lands of Krakenbar, and pledged himself to rule for the people.

“But the Sultanate soon developed a reputation for brutality, and quickly enslaved all who opposed the new regime. The Sultan’s armies pushed south to conquer all lands as far as the Tastellas to become the Krakenbaric Empire we know today. Within a decade it had developed the meeting camps of old into the basis of the cities we know today, and come into conflict with the fledgling Dianthic Empire.

“Meanwhile, the exiled tribes continued the nomadic lifestyle we had known for countless generations. Over the years some died out, while others gave in and joined the Empire. Now we the Al-Bar are one of fewer than six that remain, and we know little of those others. Some of us, like me, have joined the Blue Army resistance. It is our only chance to fight back against the traitors.” He spat the word, contempt evident in his voice.

“How many of you are there?” asked Jag.

“In my tribe, you mean? Just over two score.”

Jag looked around at the other tribesmen as they busied themselves around the fires. “Thanks for the story. I must admit, I’d never realized how the Krakenbaric Empire came to be.”

“We cannot carry many books, so much of our history has been passed down through stories. You are lucky - one of the few outsiders to hear it.”

“What happens now?” asked Jag.

“When darkness has completely fallen you may join us for the evening’s storytelling. Until then, please join your friends while we prepare the food.”

Jag found Lysander and Trink by one of the smaller fires where they were sitting with the older tribesmen and the other escapees, passing round a flask of strong spirit and explaining how they had come to be in prison. The men and women of the Al-Bar were roasting some large herd animal along with what vegetables they could scavenge in the desert, and sure enough as darkness settled over the desert and the heat began to bleed from the sand, the meal was served.

It was a good feast, easily the best food Jag had eaten for weeks. After eating they were entertained by the Al-Bar’s stories about their history

and life in the desert, and when the time came to sleep everyone wrapped themselves in blankets around the fires; Jag fell asleep almost immediately.

In the morning the fires had died down, but the rising sun was more than hot enough to banish the chill. With no oasis at this camp they were unable to wash, but the Al-Bar promised there would be one along their planned route for the day. All the ex-prisoners were to travel north-west with an Al-Bar guide, while the rest of the tribe headed deeper into the desert. The tribesmen couldn't spare them horses, or those strange beasts called camels which they used instead, but the edge of the desert was apparently within three days' march.

They set off as early as possible, thanking the tribe for their hospitality. It was a hard journey, over rocks and dunes, but the Blue Army had supplied everyone with plenty of full waterskins and the sun seemed slightly less penetrating than the day before.

It was growing dark when they reached the oasis, so they agreed to set up camp for the night. They had no wood for a fire, but they did have warm blankets, and a supply of water for washing and drinking. The morning came hot as ever, but the pool by the spring was cool and refreshing.

Maybe I could get used to being a desert nomad.

The next day was another difficult march and there was no oasis this time, though they slept in an abandoned Al-Bar campsite. On the third day of their journey the sand finally started to give way to patches of grass, and by three o'clock they had left the desert entirely. It was difficult to believe that only a few hours before they had been walking through a wasteland, for now there were hundreds of wild flowers lining the road and Jag could make out the shapes of animals grazing on the hilltops.

That evening they reached a fortified inn on the roadside. A wooden palisade surrounded a stable block and the main building, an imposing structure with the lowest of three stories constructed of stone and the others of wood. Everyone agreed that this was the best place to spend the night, although the Al-Bar guide announced that this was where he would leave them. The group thanked him for his help, without which they would not have found their way out of the desert and certainly never found the road, and walked up to the heavy iron-banded gate.

"Good evening, travellers," said a voice through the spy hole. "Will you be wanting entrance to the inn?"

"Yes please," answered Trink. "Do you know if there's any rooms free tonight?"

"It's a busy night, but I'd expect so. We can cater for them big caravans if need be." One of the gates swung open, granting entrance to the enclosure beyond. It was a welcoming sight, lit warmly by torches, and far more appealing than another night in the desert. A sign swinging from the main

building proclaimed it the Old Pony Inn.

On entering the inn itself they found it packed with all sorts of people, mostly human but with the Dianthic rubbing shoulders with the Krakenbaric. The group claimed a couple of free tables in the crowd, while Jag took the orders for drinks.

“Evening,” Jag greeted the barman, a small man with a balding head and a slight twitch. “Busy night tonight.”

“Indeed it is. Were you wanting a room, drink or food?”

“All three. We’ll need seven beds for the night, though we’d be happy to share rooms. Better have a separate one for the two ladies.”

“No problem. Would three rooms be sufficient, with seven beds between them?”

“Sounds marvellous.”

“Here you go, then.” He handed Jag three keys. “They’re up those stairs and down the corridor to the right. Numbers on the keys. And to drink? Can I interest you in the local scrumpy?”

“Cider? Uh, no thanks. Bad experience last year. I’d like two Jennic ales please.”

“Is one for yourself?”

“Indeed. Best drink known to civilisation.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Best stuff ever to come out of the Provinces in my opinion. Shame about the trouble now; prices have just shot up.”

“Trouble?” Jag frowned. “Last I heard they’d finally made peace.”

“Hah! Peace in the Provinces? As much chance as snow in Bar-Salo - it was never going to last. Though I’ll admit it was rather more sudden than anyone was expecting. They reckon those Maarist crazies have seized power in Dess and launched an attack on Vestria, which of course set off the whole bloody tinderbox. I first heard on last week’s delivery; they’re charging nearly twice as much for a barrel as last month. It’s not as though it was dirt cheap to start with.”

Jag grimaced. “That *is* a shame. I’ll soon have to move to less heavenly drink. Speaking of which, anything Dianthic?”

“There’s a bit of Dodger left.”

“Excellent - if you’ve got the taste of a sewer rat, that is. Two more pints then.”

“Coming up. It’s the last in the barrel, though there’ll be some more in tomorrow.”

“What do you have in the way of wine?”

“There’s some Dotian 642 back here. Always a popular choice.”

“I’ll have four glasses then.” Jag turned to regard the busy common room while the barman poured the wine. “You’ve got a good spot here,” he observed.

“We do indeed. There’s a lot of trade along this route, plus we get a few

regulars from the farms around. Out here we're the one small spot of warmth for over a league. There's been problems with bandits; you'll have seen the defences outside. The Legions don't generally reach this corner of the Empire unless they're looking at stirring up trouble over the border. We generally cope with trouble from outside, but there have been some shady customers recently."

"Oh? What sort of shady?"

"I dunno, really. Shifty-looking. Rarely see them outside their rooms. Never say a word." *Not Dark Acolytes, surely? Come on, Jag, you're just being paranoid now.*

"Causing trouble?"

"No, not at all. As I say, keep themselves to themselves. Just make me uneasy. Ah, excuse me; I'd better not keep this one waiting." The barman left for further down the bar, so Jag started to carry the drinks over to the table.

"Oi, what do you think you're playing at? No one gets the last of the Dodger but me!" A large man with a heavily-tattooed scalp glared at Jag from opposite the barman. He was more than a little drunk, but still appeared capable of turning his powerfully-built form to violence. Clearly he was trying to pick a fight; Jag was most certainly not, and did his best to placate him.

"Here, have it. It's not actually for me. I don't really like it, anyway."

"Insulting my taste, are you? Do you really want to settle this with your fists?" The big man raised an arm to strike Jag, but then froze, as if suddenly preoccupied by something else. It took Jag a moment to notice the point of a knife protruding from the man's chest, and then the would-be bully collapsed at his feet. He frowned, confused, until a figure dropped down from the gallery above.

It was wearing a familiar black robe, crouching, and drawing another knife from within its robes as it stalked towards Jag like a cat. The crowd was beginning to back away, and a few people screamed. The assassin, presumably a Dark Acolyte, was silent, other than speaking one word in a husky voice: "Mine."

Jag drew his own weapons, preparing himself for the cultist's attack. It moved fluidly at him, leading with its free hand while the knife was held back safely out of Jag's reach. The Acolyte was clearly experienced, and Jag's militia training as regards knives had been limited to drunks and opportunists. Techniques that had worked perfectly in the parade hall with a knife held steadily towards him now appeared to be of little help. He prepared himself for a strike, sword and *zerfyr* held in what he hoped was an appropriate guard.

In the end the attack came almost before Jag saw it. A black-gloved hand was clamped about his own left forearm while the cultist's knife shot like

lightning towards his neck. His instinct was to pull back, but he saw immediately how that would leave him open. Instead he threw himself forwards into his attacker, putting his body inside the path of the knife and the edge of his sword into the cultist's chest.

It let out a surprised scream, leapt back over a table and sprinted for a door. Jag followed, knocking chairs out of the way as he ran.

He burst through the door, into a corridor. It was the innkeeper's living quarters, cut off from the customers. A flicker of black robes was disappearing around the corner at the end.

Beyond was a wooden staircase filled by the heavy footsteps of someone running up the flight above. He reached the top in time to see one of the doors in the corridor slam shut. He rushed through, emerging into the innkeeper's bedroom.

There were countless places to hide in the room, but the doors opposite were still swinging on their hinges, revealing a balcony looking out over the courtyard. *It must have climbed down.*

There was no sign of anyone in the courtyard below, but outside the flickering pools of torchlight the shadows could have held countless unseen lurkers. Jag stepped gingerly over the wooden rail to lower himself down, knowing that this was an ideal opportunity for an ambush. It was dangerous, but he wanted answers.

He dropped to the ground. There was no sign of his attempted assassin. *That means unless he's made for the gate - and I think I would have heard if he had - there's only one place he could have gone.* Jag jogged silently over to the stables.

He entered cautiously, alert for any sound other than the horses. Tonight most stalls were full, and the horses were snorting in disturbance. *Looks like he did come this way.* One horse, however, was unnaturally quiet, standing docilely by. *Ah hah!*

Jag pushed open the stall door with his foot. The dark figure was crouched behind the horse, his hand on its side somehow subduing it.

Now Jag had the assassin cornered. He took it by surprise, using the tip of his sword to pin it to the wall while keeping as far away as he could. *Chances are he's got a few more knives hidden away.*

"Take off your robe," ordered Jag. The assassin just spat at him. Only when Jag prodded him enough to draw blood did the thing comply. Jag saw that underneath it wore a black leather waistcoat and black metal mask. He had been right: four more knives hung in a bandoleer across its chest.

At that moment Trink and Lysander rushed in.

"The big man's dead," announced Trink coldly. "I take it this is the Pit-spawn that killed him?"

Jag nodded. "Mind out, he's still armed. Would you like to do the honours?" Trink quickly removed all the Dark Acolyte's weapons, as well

as his mask. The face below was a pale one, the same shade as the dead cultists from the wreck of the *Salamander*. "Now, I think you've got some explaining to do. Because if you don't, we can make life very uncomfortable for you." Jag had no intention of torturing his prisoner, or even of killing it. The very idea made him squeamish. Still, the assassin didn't know that.

"First, who sent you and why?" Jag demanded. Again the Acolyte merely spat. Luckily Jag still had his trump card. "You see, I already know about you. You serve someone called Omega, who is the representative of some Master. Your cult plan to take over the world. I just want you to fill in a few missing details. Let's start with the Master." Finally the captive Acolyte spoke, in a rasping voice that grated on Jag's ears.

"The Master sees all and hears all. When we have cleansed this world of sin he will be the ultimate ruler, with his faithful servants at his side. All others will perish. All the evil and injustice of this world will be wiped out."

"What is he? A god, a daemon, a Mannar or a mortal? Or something entirely different?" Jag prodded the cultist again with his sword, to focus his mind on the importance of answering the question.

"He is the conqueror of worlds and the destroyer of stars. And now I will take my leave of you."

"Hah! You're not going anywhere until we're finished with you. Besides that, I suspect that if you return to this Omega to report failure he's going to kill you. Even if you don't then surely he'll have you hunted down."

"I return only to the Master, to his palace. And I shall bring you with me." The defeated assassin then began to speak in a foreign language, unlike anything Jag was familiar with. However, after a few moments he became convinced that the Dark Acolyte was repeating a particular phrase.

"Get back!" shouted Trink. "Get away from it!"

The cultist's hands were gripping Jag's collar before he could react. It didn't seem to care that it had impaled itself on Jag's sword. Jag tried to pull away, but the assassin held him tight. He became aware of an intense heat radiating from his captor's body, and redoubled his efforts to escape.

Trink struck the Dark Acolyte across the face and he let go. Jag staggered backwards just as fire erupted from the cultist's body. The man collapsed in flames, which burned unnaturally fast until all that remained was a charred skeleton.

"Bloody Pit!" Jag recovered his breath slowly, relieved at his escape from the unexpected danger. "And I was so enjoying our little conversation," he sighed dryly.

"Some people are just plain rude," observed Lysander.

"So could you tell what he was saying?" asked Jag, stepping cautiously over to the body.

“It was Malkovari,” answered Trink. “Like the cultists we overheard in Bar-Salo were speaking. The language of the Malkovari tribesmen. He looked like he could have been one of them, come to think of it, although it’s exceedingly rare to see one outside their homeland. Literally he was asking to be consumed by the fire of the Pit, but I rather suspect he was activating a spell already placed on him. It would have been set in case of capture, to stop himself revealing any secrets. Maybe the entire cult has the same spell. Could make taking prisoners rather tricky,” mused the gnome.

“Hold on,” said Lysander. “Just as he started his chanting I noticed him clutch his finger.” He reached down and removed a sliver ring from what had until recently been the cultist’s hand.

“Well spotted,” said Trink. “This is probably what was holding the spell. We’ll have to get someone who knows what he’s talking about to take a look.” He took the ring and pocketed it.

The crowd from the inn had gradually made their way out to see what was going on, and were gathered outside the stables. There was a slight applause, but it turned to shock when they saw the scorched remains of the Dark Acolyte. The innkeeper was the only one to approach.

“He won’t be doing that again,” observed the innkeeper drily. “What happened?” Jag explained, omitting to mention the reason for the attack. “I see. Well, thanks for taking care of him. I don’t want his sort in here. Can’t have people attacking my customers unprovoked. I owe you.”

“All in a day’s work for the mighty Jaggarr Garrick, saviour of the world,” announced Trink. There was some uneasy laughter from the crowd.

“Well, Jaggarr and company, good work.” The innkeeper patted Jag on the back. “I’ll get Harn’s body taken downstairs until someone can collect him tomorrow, and our new supply of charcoal can stay here for now. But for the three heroes here, drinks on the house all week.”

“Well,” said Lysander, “seems we’ve got one night to make the most of a week’s free drinks. Sounds like a challenge to me.”

Chapter Ten

The next day the group of escapees went their separate ways. Most headed north into the Dianthic Empire, and a few east, but it was only Jag, Lysander and Trink who turned to the west.

The road towards the mountains soon faded away, leaving them to cross the rolling grassland with only Lysander to guide them. Luckily the dwarven captain's sense of direction paid off, for within seven days they had reached the foothills of the Western Mountains.

"There's not many people go this way," observed Lysander as they walked. "Most travelling to the West Coast or the Holds would ride or drive through the South Pass. They don't often cross the hills."

"Where are we actually going to find the dwarfs?" asked Jag.

"Well, the capital is Axehold, but that's a long way north. The Council should be on their annual tour of the Holds, though, and if my memory serves me well they'll currently be in Shieldhold. As it happens that's the most southernly, and generally the most welcoming to outsiders."

"You know the way, right?" checked Jag.

"Of course I do. For now we just head north into the mountains."

"How long will it take?" asked Trink, eyeing the distant peaks with a grimace.

"I don't know," replied Lysander. "Depends how fast we walk, and if the snow has reached the mountains yet. Probably three or four days."

They initially made good progress. By the second afternoon after Lysander's prediction they had made it quite a way north, and the hills were noticeably higher. Otherwise, except for the ever-growing mountains ahead, there was little else to see. However, black clouds had been gathering all day long, and now sleet was beginning to fall at a rapidly increasing rate as thunder rolled towards them. It became obvious that they would soon be in the middle of a particularly vicious storm.

"How about finding somewhere to take cover?" suggested Trink. The gnome had been passing the time with a series of marching songs gathered from his travels, but it was becoming hard to properly hear him above the thunder.

"I certainly wouldn't disagree. What about that over there?" asked Jag. He pointed at a shape on the crest of a hill, a dark blur in the falling snow. "It could be a building. Perhaps worth heading for."

"Fair enough," agreed Lysander. "Hopefully we might be able to grab some real food too. There's a reason the Blue Army are revolutionaries and not palace chefs."

As they approached it became clear that the building was in fact a ruined fort of some kind. A wide, squat tower was all that really remained of it, a granite construction with high arrow-slits and its battlements half-

missing.

“Ah well,” said Jag. “No food, but at least we’ll have somewhere to take shelter.”

“Interesting place for a fort,” Trink observed as they broke into a jog up the hill. “Although now I think about it, a hundred and fifty years or so ago Krakenbar did push the frontier out this way, nearly as far as this. Only for a few years, as I recall, but it would explain why Dianthus would be building out here.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?” asked Lysander. “I suppose you’ve written a story about it as well. Though it does ring a bell, now you mention it. I believe it ruffled a few feathers in the Holds. Come on, let’s take a look.”

As they approached they saw several smaller buildings clustered around the main keep. All had seemingly been looted, for inside they were empty but for the occasional piece of broken wooden furniture. A few were intact, but the rest were in varying states of ruin, from cracked walls to some that were all but entirely levelled. None had much in the way of roofing, and so they were quickly drawn to the entrance to the keep. Inside a central wooden staircase, which had collapsed to block the downward flight, was surrounded by a ring of rooms at ground level. The three of them stood shivering in the entrance, watching the storm building outside.

“How about taking a look around?” suggested Trink. “I say we split up. We might find something interesting while we’re here.”

“What, like chests full of treasure?” sneered Lysander. “Anything remotely interesting here has been taken.”

“Trink’s right,” put in Jag. “Anyway, not everything interesting can be looted.” They split up, each taking a third of the rooms to search and agreeing to meet at the entrance afterwards.

Jag made his way around the building. He was forced to admit that Lysander had probably been correct – anything of any interest had been stripped out long ago.

When he had finished his share of the exploring he strolled back to the gate. He was the first one back, so he sat back against the wall while he waited for the others. *I wonder how far they’ve got. Trink’s probably found an interesting rock and is forming a detailed history of the ancient civilization that used it for goodness-knows-what. Lysander will have decided to rest for a moment and fallen asleep, the lazy dwarf.*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw someone further down the corridor. *Ah, here’s one of them at least.* He sat up to see who, but when he looked there was no-one there.

How odd. Must be a trick of the light, I suppose. Just a funny shadow. Despite the perfectly rational explanation he shivered slightly. “As if this place

isn't mysterious enough without seeing things that aren't there."

"It is." Jag spun around, but it was only Lysander rounding the corner. "Mysterious, that is. Anyway, first sign of madness and all that."

"What?"

"Talking to yourself."

"Oh. Right."

"Can't say I really blame you. This place gives me the creeps as well. I keep getting the feeling that I'm being followed."

Jag's sense of unease was growing. "We'd better go find what's happened to Trink. He went that way, didn't he?"

"He did. Gods know what he's up to, though." The pair walked around to where the gnome was supposed to be searching. After a while he was found lying on his front by the wall in one of the rooms.

"Trink! Are you all right?" called Jag anxiously.

"Yes, yes, come look at this! Look, look!" Jag and Lysander jogged over to see what was causing the gnome's excitement. "Look what I've found. If this isn't interesting, then I don't know what is."

Trink had found a hole cut through the floor at the base of the wall. The flagstones had been displaced to reveal the soil beneath, and an open space extending down beyond the reach of the light that shone through a hole in the roof.

"It's a hole," announced Lysander. *Insightful*. "Newly dug, as well. You didn't make it, did you?"

"No, no," replied Trink. "It was like this when I arrived."

"Looks to me like it was dug today," Lysander observed.

Trink nodded. "Look, it's still falling in. No, I haven't touched it. This was only dug as a temporary entrance. It will probably have filled in within a week. Maybe whoever dug this is still inside."

"Should we take a look?" asked Jag. "Someone clearly thinks this is worth investigating."

"We ought to take a peek," said Trink. "One of us will have to wait up here though, in case the hole gives way."

"No, I've got a better plan," revealed Lysander. "With a bit of rubble we can shore the hole up nicely. Then no one misses out."

"Let's see what we can do then," agreed Jag. There was enough loose stone around to quickly reinforce the hole, although that made the already narrow gap barely big enough to squeeze through.

"I hope whoever's down there isn't too much on the large side, or they'll never get out." Lysander looked down at the tight entrance dubiously. "I'm not sure it's even big enough for me."

"Come on," said Jag, striking a spark onto his torch. It had been weighing him down since their escape from Bar-Salo and he was pleased to finally put it to good use. "I'll go first if you want. Hold this a moment." Jag

lowered himself down until his feet touched the ground. It had been paved in stone like the floor above.

Taking the torch from Trink, Jag found himself standing in what appeared to be a bedroom. The flickering torchlight illuminated a simple wooden bed, a desk and a chair. There was also a chest in the corner, but the lid was open and Jag could see that it was empty. Three walls were bare, but in the fourth an open door led into a corridor. There the light ended.

In a minute Lysander and Trink were down, and had lit torches of their own.

“Hardly spectacular,” commented Trink. “Ancient ruins should have a bit more class than this. You expect things like you see in Mannic ruins, not some barracks. Did I tell you about when I explored Wytchhaven? No? Big shrine to Salarissa out in Eldara. Now *that* was impressive.”

“Isn’t entry to Mannic ruins illegal?” asked Jag.

“Aye, it is in most nations,” admitted Trink. “But generally worth it. After the Wars they just sealed them up, not even stopping to loot – unlike here.”

“Come on, give it a chance.” Jag grinned. “Even Mannic priestesses need to sleep somewhere. Now, I wonder what’s down there.” Jag left the room and made his way down the corridor. It was very long, with more identical bedrooms leading off the sides. All were empty apart from the same furniture. After quite a few yards he emerged into a larger, pentagonal room.

There were five iron doors, one in each wall, and all but one was open. Each was carved with a simple yet elegant motif of clashing swords. The closed door appeared to be jammed shut, with no keyhole or other visible mechanism. There were burn marks all over it, as though caused by an explosion, as well as numerous small scratches. Someone, or something, had evidently been trying to make their own way through. Despite the surface damage, however, the door still appeared as sturdy as ever.

“Maybe it isn’t a door,” suggested Trink. “It could just be a wall with a fake door to preserve symmetry.”

“I don’t think so,” said Lysander. “Not many people take the trouble of magically reinforcing a door when there’s a wall behind.”

“Magically?” asked Trink.

“Yeah, you don’t think whoever was trying to get in couldn’t have made even a bit of a dent in ordinary metal? Look, watch this.” Lysander picked up a large stone that must have fallen from the ceiling and held it in two hands. “Right.” He lifted it over his head, and then smashed it down into the door. There was a blast of heat from where the dwarf had struck. The blow had slightly scratched the door, but it was no worse than the marks already there. “Here, feel this.” The stone was hot enough to make it

painful to touch. "Another hit and this would probably crack, but that door's not going anywhere."

"Oh well," said Trink sadly. "And I bet that's where all the treasure is. By the way, we are indeed dealing with a Mannic ruin. That emblem on the doors, with the crossed swords – it's the mark of Tyrarn, Lord of Combat."

Jag thought uncomfortably back to his last visit to a Mannic ruin. "We should probably get out of here. These places must be off-limits for a reason."

"Pah, that's only for the plebs," said Trink dismissively. "Governments are worried that simple peasants would get corrupted into Mannar worship. That's not going to happen to us, is it?"

They left the sealed door and the one through which they had entered, turning to regard the others. All three of the remaining doors led to identical corridors which curved away to disappear from view. Jag was about to investigate one when he saw a dark shape on the perimeter of the light by the entrance door.

"Look!" he called.

"What?" asked Trink and Lysander together. But the shape was gone, and when Jag ran into the dormitory corridor to pursue it he found each room empty. Their mystery looter couldn't have got up the hole that quickly.

"Nothing. Don't worry," he replied as he returned somewhat sheepishly to the pentagonal room. *Maybe I'm just going mad. No, in a place like this a touch of nerves is excusable. Healthy, even.* The others were looking at him somewhat oddly, and he reddened. "How about we take a corridor each and meet back here if we find anything?" The others agreed, and left for their own explorations.

Jag's corridor took him in a wide curve that terminated in a large room. It seemed to be a classroom, for it was filled with wooden desks facing a podium at one end. At both sides stairs descended for about seven feet before they were blocked by rubble from the collapsed walls. There was no means to progress further. *Hopefully the others had more luck. Still, we know that there's at least one lower level.* Jag turned and returned to the main room.

When he got back he found Lysander was already there.

"Cave in just round the corner," explained the dwarf. "What did you find?"

"Some kind of classroom, I think. There were a couple of staircases going down, but they were both blocked."

"So it's all down to Trink then."

"Yup. Why don't we follow him down that way? Save him pocketing all the treasure before we get there."

They started off down Trink's corridor. It was much the same as the

others they had seen, though this time lined by cupboards filled with odds and ends. There was nothing worth taking.

"This isn't exactly the archaeological find of the century, is it?" observed Jag. "Surely there must be something down here." They had been following the corridor for over a minute now as it wound back and forth.

"I bet he's round the next corner," said Lysander. They approached the bend.

"No, he's not here. Maybe the next."

"Oh! What?" exclaimed Lysander in confusion as they rounded the corner. It was blocked by a cave-in, and there was no way past, not even for a gnome.

"Where the Pit has he gone then?" swore Jag, confused.

"Could we have missed something on the way along?"

"We must have. Where else can he be?" Jag and Lysander made their way much more carefully back down the corridor. It was Lysander who spotted it: a dark hole, hidden behind a column on the wall and barely a foot and a half wide.

"No. He wouldn't have. Would he?" asked Lysander. "Trink wouldn't be that stupid. He wouldn't have gone down there on his own. Not without telling us. Would he? Would he?" The dwarf grimaced. "He would, wouldn't he?"

Jag sighed and nodded. "He would. You know Trink as well as I do. Do you think he'd be able to resist this? Making the discovery before us?"

"You're right." Lysander crouched down to peer into the hole. "There's a light down there. Could be his torch. Trink!" he yelled. "Trink! Come back here! Great. That leaves us to follow him down to Awar knows where, the awkward sod."

"Indeed it does." Jag lowered himself into the darkness, squeezing through the narrow gap. Lysander could be heard to mutter something about stupid fool gnomes as he followed.

The two of them stood in the tunnel below. Unlike the passages above it wasn't lined with stone blocks; it appeared to be a natural formation, or else hewn from the rock itself. The light Lysander had seen from above had seemingly been extinguished or else moved further down the tunnel, for the only illumination came from their two torches lying by the hole above. It was barely enough to see three paces.

"What does Trink think he's playing at? This is a very bad idea for a joke." Lysander sounded annoyed.

"Listen," ordered Jag. "What's that?" A squeak could be heard. It was louder than Jag would have expected for a mouse or rat. *The darkness magnifies sound, doesn't it?*

"Sounds like a rat. I hope it bites Trink; he deserves it for this." Lysander was not normally so vicious, but worry for his friend was making him lose

his temper. "Come on, bring the torches down. I would, only I can't reach." Jag reached up through the hole to where the torches were burning. He lifted them down, giving the pair their first real view of the tunnel they were standing in. And of the source of the squeaking.

It was, as they had assumed, clearly a rat. But the moment perspective kicked in it became apparent that it was also four feet tall. A second's more study revealed details such as the knife it carried, and the cloak it wore over a leather waistcoat.

"Ye gods!" cried Lysander. "A Vermak!" Jag had no idea what Lysander was talking about, but he guessed that the rat wasn't friendly - largely by the way it was about to throw a knife at them.

He dived down to the ground as the weapon flew over him, torch falling to the floor.

As he sprung back up he realized he was automatically drawing his sword. Over the last few weeks it had become a natural reaction; it was slightly disconcerting how much of a comfort it now felt.

Luckily Lysander had kept his feet and had his axe drawn. He quickly sliced open the giant rat, which collapsed to the ground mortally wounded. Unfortunately it seemed the creature was not an isolated aberration; Jag could see more of their unnatural shapes in the shadows, all fleeing down the dimly illuminated tunnel. Two of them were carrying something slung between them - something roughly the size of a fully-grown gnome. *Trink? Damn. This is not what we need.*

"After them!" Jag called, sprinting down the tunnel himself. He could count at least half a dozen rat-creatures, but there was no telling how many waited in the darkness.

The tunnel stretched on for almost a mile, twisting all the time. It seemed to be sloping downwards, but Jag couldn't really tell in the commotion. He would have soon outpaced Lysander, were he not having to duck on account of the low ceiling. The rats (apparently known as Vermak) they were chasing had no such trouble and darted ahead, sometimes beyond the torchlight. They would rapidly have left Jag and Lysander behind, only every so often Trink would start to struggle and they would slow up while they brought him back under control.

Still, slowly but surely the quarry were gaining a lead. Often now they would be hidden by bends in the tunnel, and every time Jag worried that he'd lost them. The only thing that kept him running was the sight of Trinkertip. The pair of rats carrying him had fallen to the back of the pack, letting Jag see the gnome hanging between the two. His attempts to break free were growing more and more desperate.

"This is pointless," panted Lysander from Jag's side. "We're not gaining anything...through a long chase. They don't even seem to be tiring. I certainly am. The longer we carry this on...the further ahead they get."

Sooner or later we're going to lose them. We'll just have to stop them somehow. How?"

He's got a point. A very good point indeed. What can we- hm, worth a try.

He drew the zerfyr. *Now this is going to be a real trick shot. And dangerous.* Jag took a deep breath. *Time to really put this thing to the test.*

He raised the dagger. Now, hitting a barrel behind the militia hall was one thing, and hitting a hostile target another, but a moving target, while on the run himself? With a friend close by? Under normal circumstances he'd never dare try a shot like this. *Sorry Trink.* He made a quick prayer, and then in a swift movement let the dagger fly.

For a horrible moment Jag thought he was going to hit Trink, but to his intense relief the blade buried itself in the back of one of the Vermak carrying the gnome. The unfortunate creature tumbled forward, and Trink was suddenly spilled to the ground. Amidst much squeaking the party of rodents stopped to recover their prisoner, but by then Jag and Lysander were upon them.

Jag's sword swung up in a silver arc, catching one unlucky rat in the face. It returned down again to block a cutlass blow aimed at his waist, before striking out to stab the owner of the offending weapon. To his left Jag could see Lysander carving an equally bloody path.

He saw the attack coming from the edge of his vision and dodged. The largest rat, possibly five feet in height, caught him a glancing blow to the ribs with a mace. If Jag hadn't moved with the impact he would have almost certainly broken something. As it was, he wouldn't be surprised if he ended up with a nasty bruise the next day - if he survived.

He lunged out at the biggest rat, but found his sword parried on the mace. Jag was forced onto the defensive as his opponent rained down a flurry of blows. He wished he still had the dagger, but there was no way of recovering it in the middle of the fight.

He was still just managing to defend himself, but without any chance to strike back. Fortunately Lysander was holding back the two remaining rats that hadn't fled. The duel was only ended when the rat doubled over in pain, leaving his neck exposed to a swift stroke of Jag's blade. Looking down he saw Trink, who had just stabbed the giant rat in the leg.

"Thanks," panted Jag as Lysander cut down the last rat.

"No problem." Trink dusted himself off. "Besides, I should be thanking you. You followed all the way down here to rescue me. I didn't think you'd even notice the hole."

"How did you end up down here?" asked Lysander as he strolled over, wiping his axe clean on the leather jerkin of a giant rat.

"Not through choice, let me tell you. I'd just reached the cave-in and turned round to come back. It was then that those damned rats jumped me and dragged me down the hole. I nearly broke free early on, when you

came down. Since then I've been lugged along by those two brutes." He shot a vicious look at the rat that still lay with Jag's *zerfyr* protruding from its back. "Oh, and nice shot, Jag. You're nearly as good as me."

"So you know what those things were, then?" Jag asked Lysander, unable to hide a smile of relief that his friend was unaffected by his recent capture.

Lysander grunted. "In Dwarven, Vermak. My people have come across them before. When we extend the holds out we sometimes break into their tunnels. They always pour through and take days to flush out. Once or twice they've made their own way in, and the lower levels of a hold will be overrun. They take slaves and loot whatever they can get their grubby paws on."

"Vermak, you say?" asked Trink. "That's one name for them, though I've heard many others. Giant rats turn up in the myth of many cultures, all surprisingly similar. It isn't too much to believe that they're real."

"Especially when you've just cut through six of them," Jag pointed out.

"Especially then," conceded Trink. "So have the Dwarves investigated them further?"

"We've tried, but the Vermak are experts in fighting in their own tunnels. Three sizeable expeditionary forces have gone missing down here, as well as countless smaller bands of adventurers, looking to make a name for themselves. But we'd never dreamed the caverns extended this far south. They must be more widespread than we realised."

"This is really quite interesting," said Jag, "but hadn't we better discuss this when we get out? This place could be crawling with the blighters. You know the way back, don't you Lysander?"

"I could find it blindfolded," confirmed the dwarf. "Follow me."

Lysander led the group back the way they had come. The long winding route looked to Jag to be the same one they had taken before, but as they rounded a corner they were confronted by a sight both amazing and rather terrifying that made brutally clear it wasn't.

"Oops," muttered Lysander.

Thank you for reading this sample of *The Two Empires*. If you've enjoyed it so far and want to find out whether Jag, Trink and Lysander will ever escape from the tunnels of the Vermak, head to www.malkovari.com in order to purchase the full book.

About the Author

Jack K Burroughs was born in 1990 in Bury St Edmunds, England. He studied Law at Downing College, Cambridge, and currently works in Cambridge as a trainee solicitor.

Jack first started work on *The Two Empires* while still at school, on the basis that he liked to read but would like it even more if he got to decide what happened in the story. The first draft was completed over the course of several years, and since then has been rewritten again and again until Jack was finally happy with the text.

Aside from reading and writing, Jack enjoys radio control car racing and (to his continual surprise) jogging. He used to do karate and fencing. He would like to be able to draw but has no talent for it, which is why you won't see any of his illustrations in *The Two Empires*.

For further information about Jack and to find out about further books in *The Malkovari War*, visit www.malkovari.com. You can also follow Jack on Twitter @JackBurroughs, or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/jack.k.burroughs. You can also choose to like www.facebook.com/malkovari, if you want.

Since Jack doesn't have a massive marketing budget to promote this book, he would be hugely grateful if you would write a review for him. And if you know anyone who might be interested in *The Two Empires*, please do let them know!