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OF THE DARKWAR SAGA

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FEIST



A
KINGDOM
BESIEGED

BOOK ONE OF THE CHAOSWAR SAGA

A Kingdom Besieged

Book One of the Chaoswar Saga

Raymond E. Feist

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

This one's for John and Tammy

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Prologue

Child

The skies shrieked.

Overhead, a storm of black energies shot out tendrils that reached forth and attached themselves to the first structure they encountered. The sound generated was almost as terrifying as the sight of everything they touched collapsing into rubble.

The inhabitants of the city fled in abject terror, ignoring the plight of others, even family or close friends. Above the onrushing tide of darkness loomed a figure, a thing of such massive size and monstrosity that it lay beyond comprehension.

The remaining King's Guardians did what they could to oppose the Darkness, but there was little they could achieve against such madness. A female fled through the streets amid the trampling throng. Fearful of what she might see, she chanced a quick glance behind her and clutched her child to her chest.

Other city residents huddled in doorways, given over to despair, waiting for the inevitability of their own destruction, weeping as they clung to one another, or staring toward the Centre, whence the Darkness was coming.

From the Time Before Time, legends about the Final End had persisted, but these stories were seen as nothing more than metaphors, cautionary tales with which the Elders might teach children so they could contribute usefully to the People during this particular Endurance.

It was said that some Elders had repeated the Endurance so many times that they remembered bits and pieces of previous incarnations and had begun to piece together the plan of everything in the world. It was even whispered that some had ventured into the realms of madness—known as the “Other Places” or “the Outside”—or even to the edge of the Void, and returned, but few credited such reports as anything other than tall tales.

The People rejoiced in their Existence and their Endurance, and when their personal end came the

knew it was no more than an interruption of the Eternal Journey.

But what they faced now was the Final End, the termination of the Eternal Journey, and no word existed to express the terror and anguish that assailed them.

The female pushed through a knot of the People clustered at an intersection in the center of the city's Eastern Canton. Some had come to seek the Sunrise Gate but, having come here, did not seem to know what to do next.

Nothing in the history of the People had prepared them for the Darkness.

The mother looked down at her child, who clutched her robe with delicate claws, her black eyes enormous in the still-tiny face. "My child," she whispered, and although the screams and cries from those surrounding them drowned out the sound, the child saw her mother's lips move and understood. She smiled at her mother, showing rapidly growing fangs. Her baby skin had already sloughed off and her first set of scales were visible. If she could feed her, her mother thought, she would grow quickly and would be better able to flee.

"But flee where?"

East.

Out of the gate to the Quartz Mountains and through the Valley of Flame, then on to the Kingdom's boundary. It was rumored that others had found safety in the Kingdom of Ma'har, to the south, where age-old enmities had been put aside in the face of the common terror.

The mother elbowed her way through the press, sensing more than seeing that a fight had erupted to the north. Ancient perceptions, buried under civilized training, rose to the surface to aid her and the child. Along with them rose ancient hungers, appetites for the flesh of something more substantial than the lesser animals the King had decreed would form their sustenance. Soon the People would become like the Mad Ones, struggling for survival by devouring one another. She sensed that several threats were converging, threats that would soon turn into feeding frenzies, and she knew that to be caught up in one of those would be her doom or the child's, or both.

She chanced a brief look back and as she had suspected, claws were being wielded and fangs were dripping blood. A feeding frenzy would soon sweep through this area of the city and even with her child's life in the balance, she could easily be caught up in it. Neither of them had fed in a very long time.

A few Guardians not detailed to delay the onslaught were quickly intervening, their flaming swords rising and falling, dispatching not only those involved in the nascent frenzy but also those unfortunate enough to be slow in departing.

She turned and fled.

Once, like so many who lived in the city, she had marveled at the splendor of the King and his Guardians. They were magnificent in their armor, their terrible beauty a source of fear and breeding lust. It was forbidden for a Guardian to breed, but that didn't still a young female's desire when they flew by, their massive red wings unfurled, eyes blazing as they sought out any source of discord that might break the King's peace.

Now, she wondered how anyone could gaze back at the all-consuming Darkness and imagine any part of the realm enjoying the King's peace.

She hurried on to join a press of frightened citizens making their way through the Sunrise Gate, the eastern entrance to the King's city. The jostling and bumping threatened to turn into fights, and fights would turn into frenzies. She felt her fear and rage rising. Glancing down at the child, she found his eyes studying her face. It seemed to see more, know more, than a baby should.

The streets running eastward were becoming ever more crowded as others sought to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the coming Final End. She turned down a back alleyway running past two males who appeared to be on the verge of conflict, the energy generated by one mounting rage acting like a beacon to others nearby. Within minutes another melee would erupt, drawing the attention of the Guardians; and then yet more lives would be lost.

Part of her wondered, as she ducked around a corner, if there was any point in trying to maintain order in the face of the Final End, anyway, especially now that the King was gone. Those Guardians left behind were attempting to keep the peace, but to what end?

Everyone lived and died by the King's edict: his word was law, which was how it was and always had been.

Thus had the Kingdom of Dahun flourished through many Endurances, and Existence was as it should be. The People thrived, at peace with the other kingdoms, safe from the predations of the Savage Ones and the Mad Ones beyond.

But now he was gone.

She found herself assailed by a rising hopelessness, an alien emotion for which she had no name. Suddenly she wondered why she should go on, whether there was anything to gain by it. And then her child stirred against her, and she knew the answer.

The child was hungry. And so was she.

She spoke her own name, "Lair'ss," as if she wished her child to remember it. *So much left undone* she thought as she hurried on.

With the King gone no one could say what would become of the People now that the Final End was approaching, but she was determined to see her child to safety or die trying.

When she reached the wall, she saw the stairs to the ramparts were empty, so she climbed to get a better view of the gate. As she had feared, riots were under way everywhere as terrified people tried to leave, but the remaining Guardians at the gate held them back. No one could leave the city without the King's writ; and the King was gone. She paused, fearful and undecided.

She turned and looked down on the city of her birth: Das'taas. It had been a place of terrifying majesty, and although it was never truly at rest, it had gradually achieved a state of equipoise, a state almost approaching tranquillity. While the People would never be without their impulses toward bloody violence and destruction, the King and his Guardians had managed to keep it to a minimum, even though there were many with ancient memories that stretched back to the Time Before Time when the People had lived like the Savages and the Mad Ones, when every individual had been

spawned in the birth pits, creatures of frantic need and limited power. Strength had been earned, and the price had been bloody. Child had eaten child, and the victor had emerged stronger, smarter, and more cunning. The subsequent battles were never ending.

Then Dahun had arisen, as had Maarg, Simote, and others, each carving out their empires. Of all these rulers, Dahun had moved farthest from the madness and savagery that marked the People. But his most bitter enemy, Maarg, had been more like the Mad Ones during his rule. Dahun had instituted laws and created the Guardians, and the majesty of the People had reached its highest expression seeking to evolve them in a way unknown before. In the end, Maarg had created a realm in which the chaos of the Mad Ones had been contained, channeled, and used to build a meritocracy, in which merit was defined by strength, cunning, and the ability to recruit allies, vassals, and protectors.

All this Lair'ss knew: her memories, and those of others, flowed through her as she looked at the city, trying to decide what she should do. She crouched to prevent her child and herself from being seen against the sky by those below. Where were the flyers? she wondered.

The child stirred, hunger making her fractious. Lair'ss slapped her lightly, just enough to communicate danger but not hard enough to hurt, and the child fell quiet instantly, understanding the warning.

The role of parent was not natural to the People. Yet for generations Dahun had demanded parents to meet, mate, and then rear children. The days of crawling out of the birth pits were behind them, and each parent was required to teach a child as well as provide for it. Letting the child die or giving in to rage and killing it brought harsh punishment. Like all of her clan and class, Lair'ss did not fully understand all she had been taught. She had spent most of her youth dreaming of murder and mating mates until she had been paired with Dagri. Then she had learned a skill, becoming a mender of garments, working long hours in a room with other females.

Each night she would return to her mate, but he had perished opposing the Final End that was now upon them. Now, she felt an unfamiliar pang at the thought of him; she hadn't particularly liked Dagri when Dahun's Masjester had paired them. Still, he had become familiar, and the child seemed to find him agreeable. He had been a vassal of a rising servant of the King and had gained rank and some prestige. He was young and powerful, and the matings had been fun and always rewarding. She had even felt some delight when giving him the news that she would bear a child, which had been an unexpectedly pleasant experience. She was not sure why, but she had found joy in knowing he wanted that child. Now she felt an emptiness inside her when she thought of Dagri. He had left with the King's army to fight against Maarg, and neither the King nor Dagri had returned. She had often wondered what had happened. Had he died in battle surrounded by comrades and enemies? The image that came to her brought her both sadness and pride. Or was he lost in some distant land, with no way of returning? That image made her grieve.

Yet despite everything coming to ruin around her, she still felt it was her duty to Dagri to care for his child. She glanced down at it now, large enough that its weight was a burden on her arm, and saw those dark eyes regarding her again. What was it thinking? Did it think?

She shook her head, knowing the answer. Of course it thought. She had killed for it and seen it eat, making it stronger and smarter. Even now the child responded to her quiet words or touch, as Lair's wished. If anything, the child was cunning enough that if she could feed it one or two more times, it would become more of an ally in this flight and less of a hindrance.

Lair'ss knew it was time. With everything falling apart, the stricture against preying on others of the People would no longer be obeyed. She was certain others had already taken to the old ways, and as a result potential enemies, those who would devour her and the child, were growing more powerful and arising at every hand.

She peered in all directions until she saw a furtive figure hiding in the shadows below. A small being, it trembled at being discovered.

In a swift series of moves, Lair'ss put down the child, giving it a warning poke to keep it quiet. She leaped from the rampart to the stairs halfway down, and was upon the hiding figure before it knew she was there. After delivering a quick stunning blow, she carried the limp being up to her child.

No sooner had the unconscious figure been lain on the stones than the child threw herself with astonishing energy upon it. The shock of the attack roused the tiny creature, but Lair'ss was ready for it. A long talon slashed its throat.

Fighting back her own hunger, the mother watched her daughter feed. She could swear she saw the child grow before her eyes. The need to push the child aside and feed upon the creature herself was almost overwhelming, but her mind was still relatively free of animal rage, and she knew it was crucial that the child grow quickly. She would be too large to carry now, but after this feast, she should grow large enough that she should be able to keep pace with her mother.

Ignoring her own hunger pangs, Lair'ss watched as the corpse was consumed—bone, sinew, hair, and skin—until nothing was left but the simple robe and sandals it wore. Lair'ss's brow furrowed. In her haste she had not noticed the design of the robes. The dead creature was an Archivist, a keeper of knowledge.

Now her daughter looked at her, her gaze narrowing for an instant. Then she spoke her first words. "Thank you, Mother. That was . . . enlightening."

"You can talk . . . ?" said Lair'ss, stating the obvious.

"This one . . . lacked strength or magic . . . but he had knowledge." The child spoke each word carefully, as if trying them out and judging them before uttering a syllable. Then she rose up on slightly unsteady feet; the growth she had gained from her feasting had changed her balance and she needed a few minutes to adjust. Then she looked at her mother and added, "A great deal of knowledge."

Lair'ss knew fear then. Before her eyes, in a matter of minutes, her daughter had ceased being a mewling infant and was now a young adult, one with memories and knowledge belonging to the most guarded caste of the King's court, the Archivists.

The child's face was now almost on a level with the larger female who sat huddled against the inner wall. "I am ready, Mother," she said.

Lair'ss accepted that. Her child now had knowledge.

The child glanced around to see if they were still hidden. Then she declared, "I know a way." She turned and moved downward; unquestioning, Lair'ss followed.

They struggled though the jagged rocks. Over the city wall, down the gullies that ages of wind and rain had carved out along the roadside and through the marshes. Flaming jets of gas had barred the way, but the child knew the route to take. From the moment she had devoured the Archivist, she had become a being unlike any Lair'ss had known.

At one point they huddled beneath an outcrop of rocks as a solitary flyer hovered overhead, seeking prey below. The child would be an easy target, and if Lair'ss's strength became any more depleted she would be no match for the winged predator.

In the quiet of early morning, as the nocturnal predators were sweeping the mountains one last time before returning to their lairs, the child looked into her mother's face, barely visible in the faint light from the stars above and the tiny moon nearing the western horizon. Softly she said, "I know things, Mother."

Weak from hunger, Lair'ss replied, "Yes, I understand."

"Do you?" The child took her mother's face gently between her hands. "The Archivist's . . . knowledge, but not his memories, are mine. I know things, but other things are empty, holes in my mind." She tilted her head to one side, her eyes fastened on her mother's features. "Tell me."

"What, Daughter?"

"Tell me those things I do not know."

"I do not understand."

The child gazed out from under the sheltering rock at the setting moon. "What is that?" she said, pointing to the faint light on the western horizon.

"That is Das'taas, or what is left of it," said her mother weakly. "It was our home."

"Why did we leave?"

"The Darkness came and our Lord Dahun was gone and no one knew how to fight it."

"Darkness?" asked Child.

Lair'ss was so weak now that she sensed this might be her last conversation with her daughter. "I know little, but this much is what is known. The Darkness came from the Centre."

The child tilted her head as if remembering something. "Ah, yes, the Centre. The Ancient Heart."

"I do not know it by that name, but the Old Kingdoms, Despaira, Paingor, Mournhome, Abandon, and the others held sway since the first days after the Time Before Time. Our Lord Dahun paid tribute to the Old Kingdoms, and we stood as a bulwark against the Savages." Lair'ss inclined her head behind them. "There, to the east, where we go now. But we were told a bad thing happened."

"What, Mother?"

"I do not know," Lair'ss said wearily. "So much of what has happened is a mystery." She stared out toward the distant city. "I have been told we once lived like the Savages, spawning in pits, fighting for survival from the first moment. Each death returned us to the pits, and the struggle was endless."

“I have been told that the Kings brought order and taught us how to live a new way, how to build as well as destroy, how to care for one another without constant killing. We were told these were good things.”

“Why?”

“Again, I do not know,” she said with a long sigh. “But what the King wills is law.”

The younger female was quiet for a while as the sun to the east grew brighter. Finally she asked, “Where do we go?” prodded Child.

After a moment, her mother answered, “To the east, toward the lands of the Savages and the Many Ones.”

“Why?” asked Child.

“Because there is nowhere else to go,” answered her mother softly.

A smile crossed the child’s lips and she said, “No, there is another place to go.” Suddenly she lunged forward and her fangs closed around her mother’s throat, and with one pull, she tore it open. Blood fountained and she drank deeply as the light faded from her mother’s eyes.

Thoughts came with the feeding, not her own, but those of the being whose life she ended.

A time of calm, with a male, by the name of Dagri, who was her father. He had vanished with the King.

Images flashed, some understandable and some not, places, faces, struggles and quiet. And some of the holes in her knowledge were filled in as the more abstract knowledge she had gained from the Archivist blended with her mother’s experiences.

There had been a stable time, a time of Dahun’s dominion. Then word had come of a struggle to the west. Dahun’s kingdom was not one of the Old Kingdoms, but one of the Second Kingdoms, those that ringed the five original Kingdoms.

Then had been a war, not here, but in some other place, against a king named Maarg, and her father and others had gone with Dahun to fight him. No one had returned, leaving only the city Guardians and those who knew magic to face the Darkness when it appeared. No one knew what had become of the Old Kingdoms.

Bits and pieces of knowledge of those times and places seemed to float around the periphery of her thoughts, almost understood, tantalizingly so, but still not coherent. She knew one thing, though: if she were to survive, she needed more knowledge and power.

She regarded what was left of her mother’s body, then consumed what was left. She kept feeling odd sensations as she did so and tried to put a name to them, but couldn’t. In a strange way, she regretted the need to feed on the female who had brought her into this world, but her abstract knowledge of her race’s breeding history made it difficult to understand why she would feel a bond with this female more than any other. She paused; the Archivist thought of their collective society as “the race,” but her mother had been taught to consider herself a member of “the People.” Child understood that this was a distinction, but why it was important eluded her.

She crawled out from under the overhang, peering about for any threat. In the distance she saw

group of flyers frantically beating toward her, so she ducked back under the overhang until she was certain they had passed. Peering to the west, she saw a dark spot on the horizon. From the knowledge she had inherited from her feeding she knew it to be something fundamentally wrong, and a radical and terrible change in the order of her world, yet it remained abstract to her. She had no feelings about that.

Feelings?

She paused. Strange sensations in the pit of her stomach and rising up into her chest and throbbing in her temples had visited her, but she had no name for them. For an instant she wondered if she was in danger from them, like poison or exposure to dangerous magics.

Something tickled the edge of her consciousness. She paused and considered this unfathomable material. From the knowledge she had gained from the Archivist, she understood that memories were either there or not. To have memories from those devoured, yet be unable to reach them was unheard of; so this must be something else.

But if it was something else, then what was it?

Still not enough knowledge, she thought, and certainly not enough power. She must hunt. She must grow stronger, more powerful.

There was a stirring above, and suddenly another flyer dropped out of the evening sky. Without thought, she reached out a hand, but not in the clawed defensive position. Instead, her palm faced the attacker and a searing bolt of energy shot from it and sizzled cleanly through his neck, severing the head, which dropped at her feet as the body crashed into the rocks a few feet away.

Child felt only mild hunger but knew she needed more food to become more powerful than she was.

She hunkered down to begin eating the flyer's head. "Magic," she said softly to herself. But she had not encountered a spellcaster, let alone devoured one. Even more softly she pondered, "Now where did that come from?"

Then she set about eating the creature's brain.

1

Hunt

The horses reared.

The two young riders kept them under control, their long hours of training used to good effect on the face of the unexpected attack. From the brush behind them came the shouts of the men-at-arms and the baying of the dogs, signaling that relief would be there in minutes. Until then, the two youthful hunters were on their own. The two riders had come through an upland scrub of gorse and heather growing in a swath of sandy soil that had been denuded of trees in ages past.

Searching for wild boar or stag, the brothers from Crydee had stumbled upon something both unexpected and terrifying: a sleeping wyvern.

First cousin to a dragon, the green-scaled beast was far from its usual mountainous hunting grounds and had been asleep in a deep gully masked from their approach by tall ferns and brush.

Now, disturbed from its rest, the angry beast rose up, snapping its wings wide to take to the sky.

“What?” shouted Brendan to his elder brother.

“Don’t let it get away!” replied Martin.

“Why? We can’t eat it!”

“No, but think of the trophy on the wall!”

With a grunt of resignation, the younger brother dropped his boar spear, threw his leg over his horse’s neck, and dropped to the ground, nimbly removing his bow from his shoulder as he did so. His horse, usually a well-trained mare, was all too happy to run off as fast as possible from the large predator. Brendan drew a broad-tipped arrow from his quiver, nocked his bow, and drew and fired in the matter of seconds.

The arrow flew truly, striking the emerald creature squarely at the joint of shoulder and wing, and it faltered. Slowly, the wing drooped limply.

Martin leaped off his horse, gripping his boar spear tightly, and his horse sped off after Brendan's mount. The injured wyvern snarled and reared up and inhaled deeply, making a strange clucking sound.

"Oh, damn!" said Brendan.

"Down!" shouted his brother, diving to the right.

Brendan leaped to the left as a searing blast of flame cut through the air where he had been standing only a moment before. He could feel the hair on his head singe as the flames missed him by bare inches. He kept rolling, unable to see the wyvern, though he could hear it roar and smell the acrid smoke and blackened soil as it attacked wildly.

Having clutched the spear to his chest, along the same axis as his body so that he could come swiftly to his feet, Martin launched himself upright. The wyvern seemed momentarily confused by having two antagonists moving in different directions. Then it fixed its eyes on Brendan and started to suck in more air. From what Martin knew of wyvern behavior, his brother was about to be targeted again with another blast of flames. He cast the spear despairingly, but the range was too far: it fell agonizingly close, but short of the creature.

Suddenly, miraculously, an arrow sliced through the space between the brothers, taking the wyvern in the throat. The creature gagged, choked, and staggered backward, then shuddered and began to thrash in pain. Reprieved, the brothers raced forward. Martin retrieved his spear and impaled the creature upon it, while Brendan took careful aim and loosed an arrow into the exposed joint between the wyvern's neck and torso, straight at the creature's heart. It thrashed for another long moment, then fell still in death.

Looking to see the author of the saving shot, the brothers saw a young woman in leather breeches, tunic, and knee-high riding boots standing a little way away from them. She wore a short rider's cap thrown back over her left shoulder for quick access to the quiver slung across her back. Her bow was double recurved, compact and easy to shoot from horseback or on foot, evolved from an ancient Tsurani design, but no weapon for a beginner. Only the traditional hunter's longbow had more power and range.

Brendan's face lit up at the sight of her. "Lady Bethany, a pleasure as always." He shouldered his own bow and wiped perspiration from his brow and grinned as he glanced over at his brother and saw how Martin attempted to rein in his expression of annoyance and replace it with a neutral expression.

Born a year apart, the two brothers might as well have been twins. Unlike their older brother, Hal, who looked like their father, being broad of shoulder and chest, dark of hair, and six inches above six feet in height, these two brothers took after their mother. Their hair was a lighter brown, their eyes were blue rather than dark brown, and they were lithe in movement, slender of frame, and four inches shorter than both their father and Hal. They had a whipcord strength and resilience rather than brute power.

Bethany's dark red hair fell to her shoulders, and her face was elegant and finely formed. Her smile carried a hint of something akin to condescension as she walked in measured steps, leading her horse

toward the fallen beast. "You looked as if you could use a little assistance," she said with barely veiled humor. Like the brothers she stood on the verge of adulthood, glorious in her youth and taking it for granted. She would be nineteen years old at the next Midsummer Feast, as would Martin. The three of them had been friends since babyhood. Her father was Robert, Earl of Carse, vassal to their father, Lord Henry, Duke of Crydee. She was the tallest woman in either Carse or Crydee at six feet.

Martin frowned. "I thought you said you found hunting a bore?"

"I find most things a bore," she said with a laugh. "I changed my mind about hunting and decided to catch up with you louts."

Noise from behind her indicated that the rest of the Duke's hunting party was closing in. A moment later, three horses burst through the underbrush and the riders reined in as they regarded the three young hunters and the dead wyvern.

The rider in the middle was Duke Henry, known as Harry, since his father had also been named Henry. He grinned at the sight of his two boys and the daughter of his friend standing without injury over the fallen monster. His face was sunburned and weathered, making him look older than his forty-nine years, his dark beard showing shots of grey. "What do you think of that, Robert?" he asked the rider on his right.

Robert, Earl of Carse, reined in. His blond hair had turned grey at an early age, so it looked nearly white in the midafternoon sun. Like his companion, his face was sunburned and weather-beaten. The sight of his daughter was as good an archer as any man in the west pleased him. "I think my daughter's arrow did the honors," he answered. Then his expression darkened. "But riding unattended from the castle was the pinnacle of foolishness!"

The woodlands around Crydee had been pacified for generations, but they were still not without risk. He took a deep breath of resignation; Bethany was his only child and had been much indulged. As a result she was willful and impetuous at times, much to his despair.

Bethany smiled at her father's ire; she had been a nettle as often as a balm. Growing up, she had developed a combative nature. "I grew bored with the chatter of the ladies of Crydee." She smiled and nodded at the Duke. "No offense is intended, my lord, but I have only so much interest in needlework and cooking, to my mother's chagrin. My limit was reached, so I decided some sport was needed." She glanced at the fallen creature. "Though this sport did end abruptly."

"Ha!" said the Duke, and he laughed. "So one should wish, Lady Bethany. A wounded wyvern is a dangerous beast. Most would give the creature a wide berth."

The trackers and beaters and dogs had arrived, and Huntmaster Rodney motioned for the beast to be secured.

Brendan said, "We all took a hand in killing the wyvern, Father, but I'll concede honors to Bethany. Her arrow spared me a scorching, I'll avow."

Martin nodded in agreement, as if who claimed the kill was of no importance to him.

"What do you intend to do with it?" asked Robert. "You can't eat it."

The brothers glanced at the repeat of the oft-repeated joke. The nobility in the east might hunt the

big predators for sport, but along the Far Coast they were nothing more than a nuisance, a menace to herds and farms. Years of controlling the population of big cats, packs of dogs and wolves, and dragons such as the wyverns had kept their incursion into the lowlands a rare occurrence. Most of the Duke's hunting was for giant boar—as it was today—elk up in the foothills, deer in the forest, and giant bears.

“I think its head on the wall would make a wonderful trophy for my room, Father,” said Bethany shouldering her bow.

Lord Robert glanced at his host, who shook his head, barely containing his mirth. “Not one of your finery?” asked the Duke.

“Silks and oils, gowns and shoes are lost on my Bethany.” Turning back to his only child, he said, “It will hang in the trophy hall in the keep, not your quarters.”

Martin cleaned off the head of his boar spear in the tall grass, then handed it to one of the men-at-arms.

Brendan grinned. “Remembering her attire at the last Midsummer Feast of Banapis, I don't think your finery is entirely lost on her.”

Even the usually dour Martin was forced to smile at this. “It seems you took note.”

Now it was Bethany's turn to look slightly annoyed, and the color rose in her fair cheeks. It was a poorly kept secret that everyone expected the Earl's daughter eventually to become the next Duchess of Crydee when Henry's eldest son, Hal, became Duke. The politics of the Kingdom required all such alliances to be approved by the King, but as the Duke and his family were distant kin to the Royal House of conDoin, it kept things simpler if no strong alliances were formed between those nobles of the Far Coast and the powerful noble houses in the distant Eastern Realm.

“How fares young Hal?” asked Robert of his host.

Harry's expression revealed his pride in his eldest. “Very well, according to his last missive.” The younger Henry was away at the university on the island kingdom of Roldem. “His teachers grade him well, his presence in the royal court does honor to our house, and he only loses a little when he gambles. He writes that he intends to enter the Tournament of Champions.”

“Bold,” said Robert, watching as the three youngsters retrieved their respective horses and mounted up. “The best swordsmen in the world vie for the title Champion of the Masters' Court.”

“He's a fair hand with the blade,” offered Martin as he rode over to his father. Martin often understated things, sometimes from a dry sense of humor, at other times from a skeptical view of the world. He was always reserved in his praise or condemnation, rarely smiled or displayed displeasure, keeping his own counsel on most matters.

Brendan could barely contain his delight. “He's the finest blade in the west. Only Martin here can best press Hal. According to family lore, he's a match for our ancestor, Prince Arutha.”

Brendan was the youngest, seemingly set loose in the world with but one purpose, to plague his siblings. He had been a happy baby and a rambunctious child, always striving to keep up with his older brothers. There was rarely a circumstance that found him unsmiling or unable to wrench humor out

the situation.

“A legendary name,” said the Earl with a polite nod.

“Now, if he could only learn to master the bow . . .” Brendan added with an evil grin. Martin had never been well suited to the weapon and had shunned it for the sword.

Robert saw the brothers eyeing each other. He had known all three sons of the Duke since they were born and was used to their constant rivalry. Should this discussion continue, he knew it would become an argument with Martin growing more frustrated by the moment, to Brendan’s evil delight.

Sensing that his sons were on the verge of another of their many confrontations, the Duke shouted, “Bearers, bring the head of the beast to the keep. We’ll make a trophy of its head for Lady Bethany!”

Her father’s scowl caused a grin to return to the girl’s face.

The Duke continued. “And you two”—he pointed at first Martin then Brendan—“behave yourselves or I’ll have you riding night patrol along the eastern border.”

Both boys knew their father wasn’t joking as each had had to endure more than one night with the garrison’s night patrols, wending their way through treacherous forests in the bitterly cold dark. “Yes, Father,” they replied, almost in unison.

The Huntmaster set his bearers to work, while the nobility started the ride back to Crydee Keep.

As they made their way among the boles of the forest, seeking the game trail that would lead them back to the road to Crydee, Bethany said in a falsely sweet tone, “Too bad you boys didn’t find a boar.”

Both brothers exchanged looks, and for a rare moment, Brendan’s sour expression matched Martin’s.

Supper was festive despite the furious storm building outside. The mood was abetted by a roaring fire in the great hall, ample wine, and a sense of safety from the fury of the elements. The banter around the table was predictable; the two families were close and the meals shared uncountable.

Formal seating had been abandoned years before, as the two wives, the Duchess Caralin and the Countess Marriann, had quickly become like sisters, and had talked across their two husbands until the Duke had decided that comfort outweighed protocol.

So the Earl Robert sat in the seat tradition gave to host’s wife, while she sat in his. The two men could chat, as could their wives, and harmony was ensured.

The Duke’s two sons sat to the right of the Earl, while Lady Bethany sat to her mother’s left. After most of the meal had been consumed, Brendan elbowed his brother lightly. “What is it?”

“What is what?” said Martin, his brow furrowed as if irritated by the question.

Martin’s dour expression made Brendan’s grin broaden, as if he sensed another opportunity to vex his brother. “Either you’re dying to overhear Mother’s conversation with Countess Marriann, or there’s something on the end of Bethany’s nose.”

Martin had indeed been inclining his head in that direction as his brother spoke, but his gaze returned with a snap to his brother. His expression was one Brendan had seen only rarely, a deep and

threatening look that warned the youngest brother that this time he had stepped too far over the line. Those previous experiences usually resulted in Brendan running very fast for his mother's protection when he was very young, or his father or his brother Hal's when older.

But rather than erupt in the rage that followed that particular black look, Martin simply lowered his voice and said, "You saw nothing."

His tone was so filled with controlled anger and menace that Brendan could only nod.

Sensing something between his sons, Duke Harry said, "If this storm gets worse, we'll have a lot of work to do in the town for quite a few days." He looked at Martin. "I'll want you to take a patrol to the north and northeast, to see how the villagers fare." Then he said to Brendan, "And you're old enough to lead one as well. To the south and southeast."

"I can see to those villages on my way home, Your Grace," said Earl Robert.

"Linger a few days more," said Harry. With a warm smile he glanced to where his wife sat in an animated conversation with the Countess and added, "They do so miss each other."

"True," said the Earl. "We do seem to have less time for visits."

Leaning over, Harry asked, "You have closer ties with kin in the east. What do you hear?"

The Earl knew exactly what the Duke referred to. "Little. It is as if people are suddenly cautious at the point of silence."

Almost since the creation of the Western Realm of the Kingdom there had been rivalry between the west and east. Everything east of the small city of Malac's Cross was viewed as "the real Kingdom of the Isles" to the majority of citizens and the ruling Congress of Lords. The west was often seen as a drain on national resources, since much of it was empty and mountainous or, worse, inhabited by nonhumans, dwarves, elves, trolls, goblins, and the Brotherhood of the Dark Path. Administrative costs were high relative to the amount of revenue generated for the Crown, and there was almost no political advantage to be had from serving in the west. Real military and political advancement came from serving in the Eastern Realm. Hunting down raiding bands of goblins or trolls was not a path to promotion; fighting against Keshian raiders or border skirmishes against the Eastern Kingdoms was.

"I count on you for something more dependable than what comes through Kronador," said the Duke. "Your family is new to the Far Coast, while my house . . ." He let the sentence trail off.

The history of House ConDoin in Crydee was well known. A brother to the King had conquered the Far Coast, once Great Kesh's most far-flung frontier, and annexed it to the Kingdom, almost doubling the breadth of the nation in less than five years. Liking the area where he had ended up after his struggles, he had persuaded his brother to give him the Far Coast and built the very keep in which they now dined, Crydee.

Carse, the Earl's home, was actually the more critical trading and commerce center, being blessed with a far better harbor and sitting squarely at the heart of the coast, with all farming, mining, and foresting materials bound for export eventually finding their way to Carse's docks.

Earl Robert's father had been given the office of earl by Henry's grandfather, with the King's blessing, when the previous earl had died without issue. As no estate on the Far Coast was considered

desirable enough for any eastern noble, the award went unchallenged. More than once Lord Henry had considered that he, Earl Robert, and Morris, Earl of Tulan, were almost an autonomous little kingdom unto themselves. The taxes paid to the Crown were modest, reduced by half by what the Prince of Krondor took, but the requirements were meager as well, so for the most part the Far Coast was ignored.

“One hears rumors,” said Robert, leaning over. “The King’s health is poor, according to one cousin I consider reliable. It’s said that healing priests are required frequently for maladies that would be counted mild in most men his age.”

Henry sighed as he sat back, lifted his goblet of wine, and took a sip. “Patrick was the last true conDoin king, in my judgment. Those who have come after are like his wife, vindictive and manipulative, always plotting: true eastern rulers.” He set down his wine. “Mark you well, if the King dies without male issue, we may be sucked into conflict.”

Robert’s expression clouded. “Civil war, Harry?”

Henry shook his head. “No, but a political struggle in the Congress that could keep the throne vacant for a long time. And if that happens . . .” He shrugged.

“A regent. Who do you think the Congress would be likely to appoint?”

“There’s the rub,” said Henry. “You’d have to ask your eastern kin. I haven’t the foggiest.”

The Duke retrieved his freshly filled cup and drank slowly as he reflected. What he had said about the last “true” king was a dangerous remark should any but the most trusted of friends, like Robert Carse, overhear it.

The conDoins were the longest line of rulers in the history of the Kingdom of the Isles. There had been petty kings on the Island of Rillanon before the rise of this dynasty, but it had been a conDoin who had first planted the banner of the Isles on the mainland and conquered Bas-Tyra. It had been conDoin kings who had forged a nation to rival Great Kesh to the south and kept the pesky Eastern Kingdoms in control and forged a close relationship with the island kingdom of Roldem.

Robert noticed his friend’s thoughtful expression. “What?”

“Roldem.”

“What of Roldem?”

Henry leaned over, as if cautious of being overheard, even here in the heart of his own demesne. “Without an acknowledged heir, there are many claimants to the throne.”

Robert waved aside the remark. “Your family has more distant cousins than a hive has bees, but there are only a few of royal blood.”

“There are three princes—”

“Seven,” interrupted Robert. “You and your three sons are of the blood royal.”

Henry grimaced. “By the grace of our ancestor, we’ve renounced claim to the inheritance of anything but Crydee.”

“Martin Longbow may have, to avoid a civil war with his brothers, but that was then. This is now. There are many in the Congress who would consider you a worthy claimant to the throne should the

need arise. They would rally to you.”

“You speak boldly, Robert. Many might say you tread the edge of treason, but I have no interest for myself or my sons. Back to the truths of the moment: there are three nephews who would vie for the Crown. Oliver, the King’s nephew, is closest in blood, but from the King’s sister’s marriage to Prince Michael of Semrick, and that makes him a foreigner in the eyes of many. Montgomery, Earl of Rillanon, and Duke Chadwick of Ran are both cousins to the King, though distant.”

Robert sat back and let out a long sigh. “It’s a shame King Gregory wasn’t the lady’s man his father was. Patrick left a litter of bastards along the way before he married. Still, he has managed to sire one son.” The Earl paused, then added, “Prince Oliver’s a good lad, and you’re right, he has as much conDoin blood in him as any, and he’s betrothed to the Duke of Bas-Tyra’s second daughter, Grace. Since the Tsurani war the houses of Bas-Tyra and conDoin have stood close, more than a hundred years as one.”

“That’s a powerful faction,” agreed the Duke. “But Gregory has yet to name Oliver as his heir. The lad is approaching his twentieth year, and Gregory is not likely to produce another son, no matter how hard he and that girl he married try.” Both men chuckled. After the unexpected death of the Queen, the King had chosen to marry a girl barely a year older than his son. She was the daughter of a minor court noble, who had been raised up in rank by the auspicious marriage. The girl’s only grace was her stunning beauty, and it was reported she kept the King very happy, but other than that, she seemed a simple soul.

Rumors abounded that the King’s health was not as it should be. Given his age, barely fifty years, and his short rule, only five years since the death of his father, the potential for instability in the Kingdom was higher than it had been in a century.

“Montgomery is not a factor,” Robert continued. “He’s a creature of the court and is likely to emerge as a candidate only as a compromise short of war, but he has no standing, no factions behind him, nothing. He’s just there.”

“But he is the King’s sister’s second son, and as close by blood as anyone after Oliver.”

“It is regrettable that his older brother didn’t live. Now, he was a young man of talent.”

Henry nodded and said nothing. The death of Montgomery’s elder brother Alexander had always been something viewed with suspicion. No one gave voice to the thought, but his death in a raid by Ceresian pirates had seemed both pointless and convenient. The pirates had raided an estate that was heavily fortified yet contained little of worth. Some trinkets had been looted, but the only notable thing had been the death of the King’s nephew, who was at that time the leading contender for the title of heir to the throne. Fortunately, Oliver had been born soon after and the question of inheritance seemed to subside.

“Do you think Edward is a factor?” asked Robert.

“No. He’s a prince in name only.” Henry laughed. “And he might make a good king, because he desperately does not want the position. He rules in Krondor only as a favor to the King’s late father. Patrick and Edward were as brothers. He looks upon Gregory as a nephew, and he’ll stay there until

relieved. He will certainly retire to his estates in the east when Oliver comes west.”

“So if no heir is named by the King, and the King passes, who will the Congress support?” asked Henry. “That is the question.”

Robert let out a long breath as if in exasperation. “Only the gods know, I suspect. And Sir William Alcorn.”

Henry gave a wry chuckle. “Our oddly mysterious Sir William.”

Both men fell silent as they considered the man just named. A common soldier by all accounts from the city of Rillanon, an islander born, he had risen quickly to the rank of Knight-Captain and had been promoted to the King’s personal guard.

But when the King was a young man and sent by his father to study at the University of Rolder, Knight-Captain William had been named head of the then Prince Gregory’s personal retinue and had returned two years later as Sir William Alcorn, newly appointed personal adviser to the heir to the throne. Now five years later he was adviser to the King of Isles.

“He seems to favor no faction.”

“Or he plays off one side against the other, securing his own position.”

Robert sighed. “It is rumored he is now the most powerful man in the Kingdom, despite his over displays of modesty and humility. The King hangs upon his every word, which means no few of the lords of the Congress do as well.”

“How the truth is seen often defines the truth,” observed Henry. “If he is feared for power, how much power he truly has to wield is immaterial, for the fear is still real. And how does Lord Jamison take his position as First Adviser being usurped?”

Robert shrugged. “He’s still a power, but he’s aging. His son James the third is able, but it’s his grandson, yet another James . . . Jim’s the one to keep an eye on.”

The Earl nodded. Both men had met Jim Dasher in his guise as Lord Jamison, grandson to the Duke of Rillanon.

“What is known about Alcorn?” posed Earl Robert. “He rose through the ranks, hardly the first man of common birth to do that—Duke James’s grandfather was a common street lad, a thief even by some recounting. But this Sir William holds no specific title—it is said he refuses them, though even the office of Duke of Rillanon might be his for the asking once Lord James steps down.”

Henry shook his head ruefully. “The current Duke might object; I think he sees the office going to his son or grandson. And Lord James is still a man with whom to reckon. He holds together the Congress of Lords, truth to tell.”

“Well,” said Earl Robert, “it is of little concern for us on the Far Coast, it’s true.” Then he smiled. “Yet it is always interesting.”

“You’re a more political animal than I, Robert. But to say it is of little concern is to assume things will go forward as they have in the past, and that may not be so. There’s a difference between the Crown ignoring us and abandoning us. It’s when I consider that possible bleak future I’m glad to have friends such as you and Morris here in the west.”

“Ever your loyal vassal, my friend.”

At that moment a soldier, drenched to the skin, hurried into the keep, approached the Duke's table and bowed. “My lord, a ship is making for the harbor.” He sounded out of breath.

The Duke stood. “In this weather?”

“We have tried to warn them off with red flash powder in the lighthouse, but they've ignored us and are coming straight in!”

The Duke looked to Robert. As one they said, “Reinman!”

Henry said, “Only that madman would run before the gale and think to not end up with his ship half mile inland. Let's go up to the tower.” He motioned for Robert to follow, but by then the boys and Bethany had also stood up.

“Father,” said Martin. “You'll never see anything from up there!”

“If it's Reinman and he doesn't bring that ship to heel in this gale, we'll have plenty to see,” Henry answered. He moved out of the great hall toward the stairs that led to the tallest tower in the fore of the keep. It was called the Magician's Tower, for once the Duke's ancestor, Lord Borric, had given it over to a magician and his apprentice. Now vacant, it still afforded the best view of the western vista.

Servants hurried to bring oiled cloaks for the Duke's court. As Henry and Robert reached the top of the tower, a page barely able to catch his breath overtook them and handed each man a heavy hooded cloak of canvas soaked in seal oil. Moments later the two rulers were atop the tower, faces into the biting rain, attempting to see what they could in the darkness.

As the others gathered behind them, Earl Robert shouted over the wind, “Can you see anything?”

Henry pointed. “Look!”

The town of Crydee was shuttered fast against the storm, but light could be glimpsed leaking around the edges of shutters, through cracks in door frames, and from the lanterns of those who hurried toward the docks. The alarm was sounding, and it carried faintly to those atop Crydee Keep's tallest tower.

In the distance the glow from Longpoint Lighthouse could barely be seen, faintly red from the powder that had been tossed on the beacon to warn ships off attempting to enter the harbor.

In a severe storm, ships would make for headland seven miles up the coast and heave to behind the shelter of some tall bluffs. In a storm like this, the wise choice could be to keep sailing along the coast and circle back when the winds lessened, or to drop anchor and turn the bow into the gale.

But this captain was no ordinary seaman; rather, as Lord Henry had observed, he was something of a madman. Considered the finest captain in the King's Western Fleet, he was always the first to be sent after pirates and on dangerous missions.

“It must be something important to make Reinman chance coming in tonight!” shouted Martin from behind his father.

“The fool!” replied Robert. “He'll crash into the docks!”

In the rain and gloom, the ship raced past the lighthouse like an eerie shadow, a skeleton thing of grey and black lit by the yellow-and-white reflections of torches along the breakwater leading out

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