

RAYMOND E.
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jimmy and
the crawler

JIMMY AND THE CRAWLER

Raymond E. Feist



To the gamers who bought *Betrayal at Krondor*
and *Return to Krondor* and gave me an opportunity
to work with some of my favourite
characters again.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter One: Trap](#)

[Chapter Two: Mysteries](#)

[Chapter Three: Recruitment](#)

[Chapter Four: Arrival](#)

[Chapter Five: Theatrics](#)

[Chapter Six: Ambush](#)

[Chapter Seven: Departure](#)

[Chapter Eight: Instruction](#)

[Chapter Nine: Discovery](#)

[Chapter Ten: Hunting](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Snare](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Improvisation](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Realization](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Confrontation](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Krondor](#)

[By the Same Author](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

• CHAPTER ONE •

Trap

JAMES CRIED OUT IN PAIN.

He barely managed to pull to the right as the assassin's blade sliced his left side. Any man a scant instant slower in recognizing the danger would now be lying dead on the floor; but James stepped past the out-thrust arm of the killer, wrapping his own arm around the man's neck and drawing his dagger.

Squire James of Krondor, once known as Jimmy the Hand, boy-thief extraordinary, and now personal assistant to Prince Arutha of Krondor, had lived among murderers, thugs and bullies his entire life, and he had faced skilled assassins more times than he cared to recount. The man who had tried to take him down was not as gifted as the members of the deadly Guild of Assassins, the Nighthawks, but he was no common street thug, either. James knew this struggle would be over in moments, and he was determined not to be the one who ended up lying face down on the cobbles in a sea of his own blood.

The assassin did as James expected, reversing his dagger and slashing backwards into the space James was at that very instant vacating. His left side was hot and sticky, and hurt as badly as any injury he chose to remember, but he knew the wound wasn't life threatening, being no more than a slice across his ribs. It would require plenty of stitches, but it wouldn't kill him. Unless he allowed himself to be distracted to distract him and slow him down.

Ignoring the pain, James let himself fall to the cobbles, then twisted as the assassin lost his balance. He was not willing to let this become a grappling match, as blood loss would quickly give the other man the advantage. Instead he allowed the fellow to fall on top of him. His right elbow struck the stone and pain shot up to his shoulder. Only the frenzy of the fight kept him from losing consciousness. But he held tight to his blade as the assassin attempted to turn and strike.

At the moment when fate decides who lives and who does not, James's blade met the entire weight of the man while the assassin's blade sliced through air.

James felt the man stiffen for a moment, then go limp. He lay motionless for a long, painful minute, refusing to give in to the darkness that was threatening to overwhelm him. He had been injured enough times in his young life to understand that he was experiencing shock, and that that in itself could kill him. Losing consciousness for any length of time in this particular part of the city was a ticket to certain death. If blood loss didn't do for him, the city watch would find him floating in the bay with empty pockets.

Too many people in this part of Krondor wished to see Squire James dead. Some of their ire was well earned, but some of it was simply a matter of circumstance. The Mockers no longer officially wanted him dead for betraying them, or at least that was how it was told to the rank and file, though in fact his life had been bartered for by the Prince of Krondor in return for saving Arutha's life. Years later, he was still considered to be no longer protected by the Guild of Thieves, but the reality was that

he had begun to build a network of agents in the principality.

After a bloody encounter with the Guild of Assassins, and having discovered that the Kingdom's spy network was non-existent, Prince Arutha had charged James with the task of creating an effective intelligence service, so he had started recruiting. Among his first recruits were a number of young Mockers who still regarded him as a friend. But there were still more who would count it a lucky break to be able to brag that they had ended the days of Jimmy the Hand.

Either way, staying in this part of the city for too long was likely to bring an unwelcome end to the night.

James sat up and took a long, deep breath. His side was on fire and his head swam from the pain. He was far enough from the palace that there was a real danger he might not get there before passing out.

He got to his feet slowly, only to have the ground conspire to move beneath them. Making a quick inventory of the people nearby who might do him a good turn, he discovered the list was short. Staggering along, he kept himself upright with a hand on the wall.

Krondor's habitual night fog was thickening, and predators were likely to be shrouded in it, so returning to the palace became doubly problematic.

As a port, the city was oddly situated. There was a growing trade port less than five days' ride south by wagon which would have been an ideal harbour, being south-facing in a wide bay. Even the town of Sarth to the north would have been a better port with some dredging and a man-made breakwater. But the original Prince of Krondor, upon reaching the shore of the Bitter Sea, had declared the promontory upon which the castle was built to be where he'd raise the Kingdom's flag. The standing joke among the palace staff was that Krondor was where it was because the original prince loved the view of the sunsets from that hall.

James had to admit, they were often lovely sunsets.

He realized he was getting giddy and forced his mind to clarity as he stumbled towards his destination. As he moved slowly along, he reviewed how he had managed to find himself in the predicament. Since returning from the north and his very odd adventures involving the mad pirate named Bear, he had been investigating the presence of a rival gang in Krondor, headed by a mysterious figure known only as the Crawler.

In the last four months life in Krondor had returned as much to normal as it ever did. The prince was busy overseeing the welfare of half a nation, including being the primary spokesman for his brother the king to both the Island Kingdom of Queg and the Free Cities of Natal – the Kingdom's chief trading partners in the west, as well as its chief military threat. Bulk goods from the northern province of Yabon came down the coast to be brokered and sent eastward, while luxury goods from the east and down in the Empire came through on their way to Yabon, the Free Cities, and the Far Coast.

But one thing hadn't returned to normal, and that was criminal activity.

Which was why the Prince of Krondor's personal squire found himself bleeding more than he preferred in a side street near the boundary between the Merchants' Quarter and the Poor Quarter of the city. For weeks he had paid every rumour-monger and informant he could trust to provide half-was decent intelligence and had bullied, threatened and bribed any Mocker he could find, in order to try and piece together a picture of what was going on here.

When the Crawler had first appeared on the scene he had been viewed as merely one more interloper, an ambitious upstart who would be quickly destroyed or absorbed by the Upright Man and his Mockers. By the time James had left the city to deal with the problem surrounding the theft of the Tear of the Gods – the Ishapian Temple's most revered artefact – he had sensed that something was already different about this gang. There was a relationship between the Crawler and some very evil and bloody magic that was plaguing the principality. He couldn't connect the events of the last few

years since uncovering the demon cult in the Jal-Pur desert, the loss of the Tear of the Gods, and other odd occurrences directly to the Crawler and his men, but what James called his 'bump of trouble' to him there was, somehow, a connection, and he intended to discover what it was.

James had undertaken that mission for the prince and the Ishapians a few months previously, and since returning to Krondor he and Jazhara, the prince's advisor on magic, had been poring over reports, searching for those that directly or indirectly referenced the sort of events that might point back to the Crawler and his allies.

A pattern had emerged. Although it centred on Krondor, it extended from Durbin in the west on the coast of Kesh, all the way north to Ylith, southernmost city in Yabon Province. It had taken a lot of work, but the prince had set it as a high priority: the attempted theft of the Tear of the Gods had troubled him deeply. There were few truly sacred things in life, but the Tear was one of them: without it, all the temples in the world would be cut off from the gods for ten years until a new Tear was formed in the mountains to the west. James was one of the few outside the Ishapian Temple even to know that the Tear existed. That knowledge illustrated the level of threat: someone else knew what it was and had tried to seize it for their own use, or to deny it to the Ishapians.

Whether he was architect or agent, James did not know; but that the Crawler played a part in this he did not doubt at all.

He willed himself to take one painful step after another, holding his left arm tightly against his side, using his soaked tunic to staunch the blood flow as much as he could. His mind kept trying to wander but he forced himself to focus on what he knew so far.

Weeks of enquiry had brought James to a meeting that had a high probability of being between independent smugglers who were avoiding both the Crown's scrutiny and the Mockers' oversight, and an important agent of the Crawler. He had conferred with three of his informants, and then personally ventured out to observe this meeting.

He leaned against the wall and blinked hard, shaking his head, both to clear it and in self-recrimination at his own arrogance.

It had been a trap.

James pushed himself away from the wall and managed to get as far as the corner. He judged the time to be some three hours before dawn: the palace surgeon would be less than pleased to be woken in the dead of night to sew up the prince's squire yet again.

Still, thought James as he half-walked, half-staggered through the empty Merchants' Quarter, wasn't as if the man hadn't done it many times before.

What had struck James about talking with his informants in the basement room of the inn owned by one of the Mockers he trusted most, was that they were truly frightened. A few confrontations between the Upright Man's bashers and agents of the Crawler had produced more dead bashers than expected; moreover, the Crawler had made his intentions clear enough by looting a very special shed near the Royal Customs where items of high value were secreted away until cooperative customs agents came on duty. The contents of that shed were worth a half-year's theft, extortion and robbery to the Mockers, and the Upright Man had put out the word that any man who brought him the identity of the Crawler would be given a lifetime's riches.

The members of the sheriff's constabulary whom James trusted were equally uneasy, as there had been a few run-ins with the Crawler's men over the last few months. Unlike the usual, almost ritual confrontations with the Mockers – some half-hearted resistance, followed by an every-man-for-himself fleeing of the scene – these fights had been intense and bloody. The sheriff's men were staunch enough lads, but they were not trained soldiers and it appeared that many serving the Crawler had military training. Twice, the sheriff's men had been forced to retreat, calling for reinforcements either from their own ranks or the City Watch, only to find that the Crawler's men had fled by the

time they could press home the counter-attack.

Currently, Jonathan Means, the acting sheriff, was James's most important agent in the city. James lobbied the prince almost daily to give Jonathan the position held by his late father, despite the objections of Captain Garruth, leader of the City Watch. The captain was a good man but he wanted the city constabulary absorbed into the Watch, doing away with the office of Sheriff of Krondor; but James had Arutha's ear and had convinced him that a garrison city was not a happy city. He had travelled widely and heard many stories from older Mockers about such cities in Kesh and Queen. James had offered Arutha the alternative solution of integrating the City Watch into Arutha's household guard, the Prince's Own, which would have put Garruth directly under the control of the Knight-Marshal of Krondor, Duke Gardan. The captain of the household guard would be retiring soon, so personal ambition might sway Garruth more than losing authority over the civilian population of Krondor. The presence of three different commands of armed men made no sense to James, and absorbing the Watch into the Prince's Own would create a clear demarcation between civilian and military authority. Besides, James already had tacit control of the sheriff's constabulary as an adjunct to royal intelligence, and he didn't want them being frustrated by well-meaning Watchmen whose charge was ill defined and based on tradition. The Watch defended the city from enemies without and within; the constabulary kept order, while the Prince's Own defended the palace. James wondered at what point someone in authority had thought this was a good idea.

Whilst dwelling on these concerns he had stopped moving and now found himself leaning against another wall. He couldn't even judge how far he had come. Between his loss of focus and the fog, he wasn't even entirely sure where exactly he was in the Merchants' Quarter. He squinted at a sign above a doorway depicting a bolt of cloth and an oversized needle and finally recognized it as William's Sons Tailors.

He pushed himself away from the wall and took a few steps to the corner. Moving caused him an unexpected moment of clarity. As he rounded a corner giving onto a broad boulevard that would take him straight to the palace, he appreciated the fact that one unintended consequence of this situation had been his ability to return to his old haunts – the sewers and rooftops of the city – almost untroubled. Even though the death mark had been lifted, he had been cautioned to keep clear of the Mockers and their dens, or else there would be no guarantee for his safety. But James, being Jimmie, had ignored that and dared to travel the rooftops or sewers at need, but it had proven cumbersome and at times difficult, for he had often had to lie low while Mockers conducted business between where he found himself and his destination.

During the recent confrontations with the Nighthawks and the quest for the return of the Tear of the Gods, he had done enough damage to the Crawler's men to have earned back some grudging respect from the Upright Man. James was among the most likely to achieve the Upright Man's goal – ridding Krondor of the Crawler – and therefore he was now a valuable ally to the Thieves' Guild, so the Mockers had started to look the other way when he went poking around.

James reached a point roughly halfway between his ambush and the palace and stopped for a moment to catch his breath. He clutched his side and felt more blood drenching his shirt beneath the leather tunic he wore. This wound was not going to heal on its own. As loath as he ever was to admit he was wrong, he realized he had underestimated the damage he had sustained.

He heard footfalls, boot heels striking the cobbles coming from somewhere up ahead. The lampposts were placed far enough apart that small dark areas lingered between the pools of light, and into one of these he quickly ducked. He had no trust in the Goddess of Luck. Experience had taught him that self-reliance was always his best bet. If there were a god of self-reliance, he'd have been praying to him fervently. He found the irony of that contradiction amusing, or as much as he could be amused, given his current situation.

The footsteps got louder and James struggled to stay focused: there might be a furious minute or so coming up that would decide his fate. He reached across his body and slowly wrapped his right hand around his sword hilt, flexing his fingers and tensing as three figures hove into view.

He was teetering on the brink of collapse when they came walking into a pool of lamplight.

Catching sight of the figure in the shadows drawing a sword, the men slowed and fanned out, each of them also drawing a weapon. Rather than rushing into an attack, they approached slowly. A few yards away from James, the two men on the flanks stopped while the one in the middle said, 'What passes this night?'

James blinked in confusion for a moment, then pushed himself away from the wall. 'Jonathan?'

The acting sheriff, Jonathan Means, looked incredulous. 'James?'

'I could use a bit of help,' said James.

And then he fell forward, losing consciousness so swiftly that he did not even feel strong arms grab him to stop him striking the cobbles.

• CHAPTER TWO •

Mysteries

JAMES OPENED HIS EYES.

An oval shape hovered above him, and slowly it resolved itself into a face. Dark eyes looked down on him with concern, but there was an amused set to the lips. A woman's voice asked, 'Are you all right?'

James's first impulse was to say something clever, but he couldn't think of anything clever.

The face above him repeated the question.

James smiled and blinked and he finally replied, 'You're so pretty.'

A light laugh was echoed by a deeper masculine one, and someone out of James's sight said, 'I'll send for the prince.'

'It's the drugs,' said another male voice behind James.

He tried to turn and felt agony rip up his left side. A soft hand pushed gently on his shoulder, firmly forcing him back down. A fog seemed to lift from his mind and at last he recognized the face above him. 'Jazhara?'

The Prince of Krondor's magic-advisor smiled. 'Welcome back. We were worried.'

She was a woman of medium height and solid build, though her figure tended to curves and her legs were elegantly tapered. By any measure she was attractive, and she had a no-nonsense attitude that discouraged James's usual tendency to try to disarm ladies with practised flirtation.

The voice behind James said, 'If Sheriff Means hadn't fetched you here quickly, Squire, I think you might finally have left us.'

The disapproving tone brought recognition even though the speaker was still out of James's line of sight. 'Ah, Master Reynolds, again I am in your debt.'

The face of an older man moved into view, hovering over Jazhara's shoulder. It was William, lieutenant of the prince's household guard and son of the magician Pug.

'Help me sit up,' begged James, and Jazhara piled some pillows up behind him so that he could look around the room. As the last effects of the sleeping draught the surgeon had given him before sewing him up wore off, pain returned. He winced as he settled into the pillows.

'I've sent for the prince,' said William, walking into view. The young soldier had matured greatly since entering the prince's service and had become James's unofficial partner in crime. James's best friend, Squire Locklear, had been banished to the northern frontier of Yabon as punishment for a transgression involving the wife of an influential man at court. James had thought more than once that the women would be the death of Locklear.

William was a different sort, something of a romantic idealist. Taller by half a head than his father, Pug, he looked like the icon of the loyal prince's soldier: broad shoulders, resolute expression, brown eyes that gazed unflinchingly upon danger. James often tried to get his goat with a barbed remark, but

William would have none of it. He was as stalwart a man as James had ever met, and the former ~~th~~ actually enjoyed that fact about William.

James sighed as he shifted position, glancing from Jazhara to William. William had obviously been in love with Jazhara before arriving in Krondor, from when they had been students together at Stardock. His attempt to get over her had led to a romance with a local innkeeper's daughter, who had come to grief. He had suffered greatly over Talia's death. In James's judgment Cousin Willy, as he was known to Arutha's family, had succumbed to Talia's charms more because she was crazily in love with him rather than he with her. She had been beautiful, vivacious and a flirt, but once she met William all other boys and men had been forgotten. For most men it would have been difficult to resist. But once Jazhara appeared in the city . . .

James understood the story. He hid it well, but William still cared deeply for Jazhara, or James knew nothing at all.

For his part, James avoided romance. He didn't trust women. More to the point, he didn't trust men. He trusted individuals, and after Chirurgeon Reynolds had departed, it occurred to him that the two remaining in the room were second only to Prince Arutha in earning his trust. Jazhara was new to the court and a Keshian by ancestry, but she had been a staunch ally who had faced deadly danger without flinching. Without her participation in the affair with the pirate Bear and the recovery of the Tear of the Gods, James and William might now both be dead and the hidden enemies behind that artefact's theft might even now be planning to unleash chaos upon every man, woman, and child in the Kingdom.

For a moment the wry thought passed through James's mind that despite their efforts to remain platonic, William and Jazhara were not done with each other. He just hoped, with some apprehension, that things didn't get too awkward or interfere with more pressing concerns.

Now Prince Arutha arrived. He too bore that expression James had come to know so well: the one that was set halfway between concern and wry amusement. 'Almost got yourself killed, again, I see.'

He had changed since James had first met him as a boy, back when he had foiled the Nighthawk's first of many attempts on the prince's life. The youthful whipcord body had broadened a little, and palace life had put a few more pounds on Arutha, but he was still a man of slender frame and as fast an opponent with a sword as James had ever encountered.

'Occupational hazard,' James said, sitting up a little straighter. 'I do recall, Highness, more than one occasion when you were less than prudent when it came to staying out of harm's way.'

With a grimace, Arutha echoed James's last statement. 'Occupational hazard, indeed. However,' he added, 'I find myself bleeding considerably less frequently than you do, James.'

James's grin expanded. 'Well, in fairness, you don't get out as much as you used to. A few days of bed rest and I should be good as new, Highness.'

'We can't afford the time, I'm afraid. I'm sending to the Temple of Sung to fetch in a healing priest. You get one day to sleep off whatever horrible concoction you're forced to drink, then you're back out there the next day.' His expression darkened as he said, 'I do read the reports coming in from Jonathan Means and Captain Garruth, Jimmy. Along with what you've told me, it looks as if we may have something far more sinister going on here in Krondor than a simple struggle for supremacy between rival criminal gangs.'

He turned to leave, then paused. 'You three did well – very well, actually – with that situation up on the coast, so I'm inclined to grant you latitude if you think you need it.' Pointing his finger at James he added, 'As long as you don't get yourself killed.'

James noticed he avoided mentioning the Tear of the Gods directly.

Arutha continued, 'I think it's time to put the three of you back together. Willy, I'll inform Duke Gardan you're on detached duties for a while, so you'd best go do whatever you need to do until James

is well enough to wreak havoc in your life. Jazhara, do your best to keep the boys out of trouble, please?’

She couldn't hide her smile as the prince departed for his private apartment.

‘Great,’ said James, lying back on the pile of pillows. ‘A magic healing draught.’

Jazhara smiled. ‘I know little about clerical magic: the temples are very guarded about their craft.’

James shifted a little, trying not to groan or wince as he sought a slightly more comfortable position. ‘They have their secrets, it's true. Some of the temples are downright hostile if you intrude into what they see as their territory, but I've come across a few clerics who are decent company on a long ride. I think the prince is trying to make a point, as if suffering these injuries isn't enough of a reminder of the danger of some of my choices . . .’ his voice rose a little in annoyance, ‘. . . so I need to choke down a foul concoction to drive the point home.’

‘The point being?’ asked Jazhara.

‘To be more bloody careful in the future,’ said James with a wince. He sighed a little dramatically. ‘It's not like the prince can't afford the magic. He just wants me to suffer.’

William couldn't help himself from bursting out laughing, which brought a black look from James. ‘Some of the temples have magic that will heal you up and leave no scar, even yank you back from the verge of death.’ He lowered his voice. ‘Some are rumoured to be able to yank you back from the other side of the verge, if the gold is right. There are stories of wealthy men who have made generous contributions to the temple of Sung the Pure, and they have mysteriously returned to health and vigour after a terrible illness or otherwise mortal wounds in battle.’

William smiled, knowing that James was embellishing his tale for dramatic effect. ‘Then why,’ he asked, feigning ignorance, ‘didn't His Highness simply ask a priest to pop over in the first place and wave away your wounds, rather than putting good Chirurgeon Reynolds through such toil?’

‘To save gold,’ said James with a straight face. ‘Our master is a thrifty man, Willy. And he has a keen sense of humour. The healing draught is the most foul-smelling concoction known to man, and this from a fellow who grew up living in the sewers!’

Jazhara put her hand over her mouth and tried not to laugh, but failed. ‘I thought you said he was making a point.’

‘Well, that too,’ replied James.

‘Really? You're serious? To save gold?’

‘Really,’ said James. ‘Now, you two go off and let me sleep until the good father arrives. Even with the draught I'll be useless unless I get a good night's sleep.’

William and Jazhara glanced at one another and then made to leave. At the door William turned. ‘Do you need anything—’

James was already fast asleep.

‘How do you feel this morning?’

‘I might be a fair match for a three-day-old kitten, Willy,’ said James, his eyes surrounded by dark circles.

Jazhara made a face and William said, ‘What?’

‘Only James here and the prince call you “Willy”.’

‘It's the boys,’ said James. ‘Borric and Erland grew up calling him “Cousin Willy”, and Squint Locklear and I picked it up.’

‘No one else,’ said William. He shrugged as if it was of no importance.

‘I find it less than respectful. “Willy” sounds like a kitchen knave's name!’ She shook her head slightly. ‘You will never hear me call you that.’

James laughed, then winced. He moved his arm on his injured side as if trying to stretch out the

muscle.

‘Did the healing draught not work as intended?’ asked Jazhara.

James stifled a yawn. ‘My side is fair, if a bit tender to the touch, but otherwise as good as new. No, it’s the other effect of the draught . . . suffice to say I was back and forth to the garderobe many times last night. Sleep came in bits less than an hour long.’ Finally the yawn escaped. ‘Sorry,’ he said, covering his mouth with his hand. ‘A good night’s sleep and I’ll be fine.’

‘Then you’ll get one tonight,’ said a voice from behind. The three turned to see Prince Arutha entering the office from the door that led to the royal family’s apartment. He waved them to sit down as he pulled out the chair from behind his own desk. ‘I have been reconsidering reports from various sources around the Western Realm, and I think we may have discovered a thing or two . . .’ He raised his eyes to James and added, ‘. . . despite your incapacity. We do manage to muddle along without you.’

James could feel his colour rising while Jazhara and William worked hard to contain their amusement. James was not shy about voicing his opinions on how the business of the Western Realm was conducted, most of which was far outside his area of responsibility or expertise. Yet Arutha indulged him more often than not, and both knew to some degree it was due to the affection in which he held his squire, as well as the fact that James had proved his value well and often. His life had hung in the balance more than once, and he had been an effective agent for the Kingdom since coming to Krondor. Moreover, James possessed a uniquely keen intelligence. Arutha was grooming him for greater responsibility in the future.

The prince was silent for a moment, framing his next remark. James was used to these silences. Arutha was always precise in what he chose to say. Finally the prince said, ‘James, I’m releasing you from your office. Find another lad to do those things you leave for other lads to do, anyway. I’m giving up on the notion that you’re anyone’s idea of a squire. You’ll have a new letter of marque tomorrow. You’re a knight of the court as of this morning.’

He turned to William. ‘I’ve already told Gardan I’m going to need you away from the garrison, so you’ll be holding your rank of lieutenant in the royal household guard, but reporting directly to me only. Is that understood?’

Unable to hide his surprise, William replied, ‘Yes, Highness.’

‘You three work well together, and I think I’m going to need your full combined attention on the Crawler business. So, beginning tomorrow, your task is to discover this miscreant’s identity and bring him to justice. Everything else is secondary. Understood?’

All three of them nodded. ‘Good,’ said Arutha. ‘James, go get some sleep.’

James hesitated, then realizing he was dismissed, stood and said, ‘Thank you, Highness.’

‘Don’t thank me yet, Jimmy,’ said Arutha. ‘With greater rank comes greater responsibility.’ As James turned, Arutha added, ‘And more chances to get yourself killed.’

James hesitated for a bare moment, then continued out of the door.

Arutha looked from Jazhara to William and back. ‘I don’t know what went on between you and Stardock and I prefer to keep it that way. I don’t intrude into the lives of my court officers unless their behaviour reflects poorly on my court, or hampers their service. I expect you both to deal with whatever difficulties may lie between you.’ He sat back, steepling his fingers. ‘James is a young man of prodigious talent, and he has ambition. If I don’t keep him on a short leash he’ll get himself killed, but too short a leash makes him ineffective; so you two will be my leash when you’re gone from the city.’

‘Gone, Highness?’ asked William.

‘It is almost certain, given what we already know, that you three will soon be on your way to Kesh.’

Jazhara nodded. ‘Since the night of my arrival, much of what I have seen involving crimin

activity in Kronдор has involved Keshians.’

‘Not all your countrymen in my city can be your great uncle’s agents, Jazhara.’ Then Aruth revealed one of his rare smiles. ‘Though on occasion I’m inclined to think they all may be. Abdur may be the cleverest man I’ve ever encountered.’ He stood up, and they rose a moment after. ‘I must return to my other duties. You two keep a close watch on James. He may end up running this nation some day, and I suspect he’ll do a masterful job, so don’t let him get killed before that. Understood?’

Then without another word, he turned and left them standing in his office.

They exchanged glances and then, silently, departed.

Jazhara waited until they were halfway between the prince’s private rooms and the great hall before she said, ‘What is it he has heard?’

William shrugged. ‘Gossip, no doubt. His Highness keeps a close watch on everything. Rarely anything undertaken in Kronдор or the principality without his being aware of it. Your arrival was anticipated by many, for you are a novelty.’ He studied her face, one he knew in every detail from their short-lived romance.

Being a few years older than William, Jazhara had still been young enough not to understand the difference between their feelings for one another until it was too late. She loved him after a fashion and had enjoyed the intimacy while it had lasted, but he had been completely overtaken by a deep and abiding love. Their break-up had been bitter and he, being young, had not handled it well.

That had been one of the many reasons why William had decided to leave Stardock and take service with Arutha. The other reasons involved disputes with his father over his role in the Academy. William had what could only be described as a ‘magical gift’: the ability to hear what animals were thinking. His father had assumed that meant William would take up magic as his calling, but other than the one odd ability, he felt no calling for, nor displayed much talent in, other areas of magic. He wished to be a soldier, a dream of his since childhood, and on several occasions after his fourteenth birthday his mother had had to end a heated exchange between William and Pug.

William stopped and Jazhara turned a half-step later and said, ‘What is it?’

William paused, framing his thoughts. ‘It doesn’t have to be difficult. We’ve already weathered our . . . adventure,’ he said with a pained grin, ‘and no doubt we’ll face other challenges for the prince. It seems Arutha is putting us in Squire James’s – excuse me, Sir James’s – charge, and we both know that means a lot more danger and a lot less comfort.’

Jazhara nodded. ‘James does attract trouble.’

‘Attract? No, he’s rather keen to ferret it out,’ corrected William. ‘That’s why Arutha treasures him so much.’ He glanced around. ‘James expects to be running this castle some day, and I expect he probably will. But what I mean is, we don’t have to make this any more difficult than it already is. That’s what I think the prince was hinting at.’

‘His Highness doesn’t strike me as the type of man to hint, William.’

‘Mostly you’re right,’ said William. He walked on. ‘But sometimes he lets the other person puzzle things out for himself—’ he inclined his head, ‘—or herself, because it makes the message much more . . . personal, I guess.’

‘So what you’re saying is, you’re willing to put the past behind us?’

William stopped in mid-stride as if to think about the question, then started walking again. ‘I’ll never going to forget anything, Jazhara,’ he said quietly. ‘I’m just not going to let it get in my way, that’s all.’

‘I can accept that,’ she said, studying his face.

‘What?’ he asked after a moment.

‘Nothing,’ she said with a half-smile. ‘It’s just . . . you’ve grown up since Stardock.’

‘Being around James ages you . . . rapidly.’

She laughed and they let silence overtake them.

The next morning James, William, and Jazhara were summoned to Prince Arutha's private apartment as he was finishing his morning meal with his wife and children. The twins jumped down from the table and ran over, shouting, 'Uncle Jimmy! Cousin Willy!' and hugged both in turn. They were polite in greeting Jazhara, as she was relatively new to the court and hadn't achieved 'auntie' status just yet. Baby Elena grinned and laughed at the sight of the two 'uncles', then shrieked delightedly.

Princess Anita took a moment to greet both young men, who bowed; and Jazhara, who curtsyeed despite wearing trousers instead of a skirt. 'It's good to see you again, boys, and you as well, Jazhara. She squeezed the young woman's hands. 'You must find time to visit us so that we can get to know each other better.'

Suddenly a yelp of anger and a wailing cry announced that the boys were getting into one of the usual scuffles. Both Arutha and Anita hurried to take care of the baby and herd the boys into the nursery room.

Jazhara looked at James and saw an almost rapt expression on his face. She smiled.

William said, 'Nothing like my family back in Stardock, is it?'

Jazhara shook her head. 'Nothing like mine either.'

James chuckled. 'This is the only family I've ever known. If I ever do wed, I'm going to try to be as much like them as I can.'

Arutha returned, closing the door behind him. With a rueful smile, he said, 'I wonder sometimes how my father coped with my brother and me when we were young.'

James grinned. 'I believe I've heard parenthood described as "nature's revenge", Highness.'

Arutha laughed briefly, then nodded. 'Well put.' He motioned for them to follow him through another door into his personal study. He sat down behind his desk. 'Very well, where do we start?'

Without hesitation, James answered, 'Kesh. Specifically, Durbin. We don't actually start there, but I'm certain that's where we'll end up.'

'Elucidate.'

William and Jazhara both looked on with interest: they had arrived at a similar conclusion, having discussed it over a shared meal to break their fast before coming to this meeting.

'At every turn we find Keshians involved, Highness,' answered James. 'I've used every contact I have here in Krondor, inside the Mockers and outside, and I've ruled out an attempted takeover both from within the Guild of Thieves – the Upright Man is too smart and has too many loyal thugs at his disposal – or from without. The independent gangs still pay tribute to the Mockers and conduct only the business their small franchises permit.'

'What's more,' he continued, 'the Mockers have reached along the coast of the principality up to Sarth and out along the south coast to Land's End. Mostly smuggling . . .' He smiled for a moment and the prince returned the smile. When he and James had first met, with Arutha fleeing Guy du Baudouin Tyra's secret police, he had been sheltered by the Mockers and a band of smugglers under the control of a man named Trevor Hull. One unintended consequence of those events had been the eventual wedding of Arutha and his princess, Anita, but the other had been the development of an apparently successful partnership between the Mockers and smugglers that had gone on for years.

'There are moments,' said Arutha, 'when I think making Krondor a tariff-free port would save the Crown more cost than we make arresting smugglers.'

'But where would be the fun in that?' asked James.

With a wave of his hand Arutha indicated James should get back to the point.

James continued, 'We can rule out any sort of encroachment from the east – there is no criminal group of note between here and Salador. There are plenty of criminals between here and there, but

they are not organized.'

'So that leaves Kesh,' said Arutha.

'Absolutely. It's possible some group from Queg or the Free Cities might be working for the Crawler, but as we've not found a single Quegan or Free City man so far among the Crawler's crew, logic dictates it's Kesh. And if it's Kesh, that means Durbin.'

'Well, that's the most likely place to start,' said Arutha.

'Not quite yet, Highness. We can't merely take ship to Durbin and wander off the docks asking where we can find the Crawler. We need a convincing story to cover our arrival.'

'What did you have in mind?' asked the prince, his expression revealing anticipation for one of James's more entertaining plans.

• CHAPTER THREE •

Recruitment

MEN SHOUTED.

As the ship came into dock heavy bags of stuffed canvas on ropes, called fenders, were dropped alongside, preventing damaging contact. Still a solid thump and a groan of wood accompanied the lateral motion of the ship as the dock staff tied her off and the crew prepared to roll out the gangway.

James scampered down the ratlines from the mainmast, then nimbly leapt off the railing to land between two dock workers, startled by this unusual manner for a sailor to depart his ship. He ran where the gangway was being secured and made a show of lashing down some random rope around a stanchion, then with two steps he was off into the crowd on the pier.

Sir James, newly minted Knight of the Prince's Court in Kronador, had been left behind on the docks of that city. Dodging through the press of sailors, dockhands, prostitutes, thieves, and other assorted miscreants, was one Jimmy the Hand, master thief.

He worked his way through the crowd, watching faces. He moved with purpose as if on his way to a specific destination, but his eyes were constantly seeking out clues as to where he might begin his search. He reached the far end of the docks, where the quay ended and a cluster of hovels occupied the shoreline for several hundred yards, turned and saw a stall where a bored-looking garment-dealer stood.

James knew from his demeanour and position that he was a seller either newly come to the docks or someone who had run foul of whoever allocated locations for merchants – probably a corrupt official in the Governor of Durbin's court – for the only worse location James could imagine would be outside the gates of the city. The man tried not to appear too anxious as James approached, reaching for his belt pouch.

'I travel the sands tomorrow,' said James.

If the merchant was puzzled by one who was obviously a sailor needing caravan garb, he said nothing, but rather broke into a rattling discourse on the high quality of his wares. James ignored him, nodding absently as if listening, but looking for just the right gear to blend into the city. He pulled out a pair of *chalwar*, those loose-fitting, dark-indigo trousers favoured by the desert travellers. They were of good cloth and the merchant said, 'Ah, you have an eye for quality! These are the finest—'

James just continued to nod. He spoke passable Keshian, having dealt with them in Kronador over the years, but his accent clearly placed him as a Kingdom man, so he kept his comments down to grunts and occasional words. Finally he had selected a dark tunic, a matching turban, and a *haik*, a large cloth worn around the body, which was useful in many ways when travelling the desert. In the heat of the day it could be converted to a makeshift tent simply by raising it over the head with a riding crop or some other stick, or even on the hilt of a sword. It was also a blanket when needed, and could save one's life in a sandstorm.

James made a show of haggling, for not to do so would attract attention, and when all was done, he quickly changed his outfit and went back the way he came. He carefully changed his walk from the rolling gait of a sailor to an almost pigeon-toed wide stance, raising his knees like a man used to walking through deep sand. More than one spy had died because the way he moved gave him away. As he followed his previous course in reverse, he saw that the three men he had marked in his first passage were still in place: a barrel-maker who had made no progress on his keg since James had seen him last, an apparently shiftless dockhand who wasn't seeking work or trying to stay out of the mid-morning heat but sat in the sun carefully watching all who walked by, and at the last a prostitute who avoided finding clients.

If Abdur Rachman Memo Hazara-Khan was as clever as James knew him to be, the head of the Keshian Imperial Secret Police had put these three out to be easily found, while other agents watched who watched them. These other agents were quite a different story: they would be impossible to detect easily, and James knew that anyone he passed by could be working for Keshian Intelligence. He might spend days observing these people before he got a hint of who the true agents were.

Lord Hazara-Khan might be content to leave Durbin's miserable inhabitants to the mercies of the governor's rule, but the city was still a gateway into the Empire, and the head of Kesh's Intelligence Service would wish to know who passed through that gateway, as well as keeping the governor's excesses somewhat in check.

By the time James got to the opposite end of the docks he had spied at least two other agents watching for people such as himself. He knew he would attract attention if he made a third reconnaissance, even in disguise. The docks, like the city square, or other heavily travelled areas in any city, had a rhythm, a flow of people from one place to another, and just breaking that flow would draw notice.

His time was limited, for the sight of a desert man at the docks, while not unusual, was less common than sailors and traders, so he kept walking.

Jazhara and William would be arriving the next day on a diplomatic mission for the prince to the Governor of Durbin. Given the horrors they had encountered so far since the three had been given the mandate to recover the Tear of the Gods, it seemed a good idea to begin at the top – the governor's palace – and work down as they sought out any magical or demonic influences. Once that charade was accomplished, Arutha had left it up to James to decide how to proceed. Being in Durbin meant they could return to the Kingdom if needs be, or venture into the surrounding countryside should the trade take them outside the city. As Jazhara's people were encamped to the south, her taking a small retinue of guards out of the city by horse or camel would not draw undue attention. James relished the possibilities, and discovered he was also enjoying the responsibilities given to him by the prince. Always without false modesty, and with more than his share of bravado, Jimmy the Hand, now Sir James, Knight of the Court, was finding his rise as addictive as any drug sold in the back alleys. He also discovered that he lacked personal ambition, wishing for no wealth or power for its own sake, but only the opportunity to serve Arutha.

Almost giddy with the realization that he was having the most fun he had experienced in months, he set off to see what Durbin had to offer.

The girl was unusually attractive and a bit unexpected. She was Kingdom-born by appearances, with fair skin only found along the eastern Kingdom frontier in Great Kesh. The usual tavern dancers in Kesh tended to be buxom and plump, but she was neither. Slender, with a nice roundness in the appropriate places, she had blue eyes and almost black hair. She wore a jade-green costume consisting of a brief top and even briefer bottoms, and a swirl of gauzy veils that floated around her as she danced. She moved slowly to a drum-and-pipe melody played indifferently by two musicians sitting

near the tiny stage in the corner. At least this tavern had a stage, James reflected. He had been in a few places where the girl would be kicking over drinks on the bar or knocking food off the table if the customers were too slow in making room for her.

Sipping his second-rate ale, he watched her from the bar as she finished dancing and worked her way through the room, seeking customers for whatever the traffic would bear. Some legendary dancers had accumulated great wealth by being the object of desire of wealthy merchants, at least in Keshian lore. Those stories originated in the great pleasure palaces of the city of Kesh, where nobility and wealthy commoners would mingle and the most beautiful courtesans in the Empire lived in luxury and where jaded men of immeasurable riches would ignore them too long for dancers they could not have. It was almost poetic, thought James; and almost certainly completely baseless romance. In his experience, women of any type in these places had a price. Still, the tales persisted of dancers who held sway over rich men without ever having to surrender to their desires.

This one, however, was obviously not one of those girls. James thought that had fate been different she might have aspired to much: she still had a fresh quality, a liveliness that was unusual in the calling. She was flirtatious and smiled a great deal, and James imagined that her Kingdom background would be inviting to those eager to sample more exotic wares, especially with that clear skin and luxuriant hair. After a few years in the taverns, most girls lacked both these traits, concealing the damage of too much drink, smoke, and drugs under a heavy application of cosmetics and hair colouring. They had a listless indifference to their surroundings and daily existence that stood in stark contrast to this vivacious girl. James hoped she understood she was at her peak and needed to take advantage of it while it lasted.

She reached his side and smiled brightly: then her smile turned quizzical. 'If you're a desert man I'm a tree frog.'

'One doesn't need be from the desert to know how to dress for it,' James answered neutrally.

'A traveller, then,' she observed.

'As are you. Kingdom?'

She nodded. 'By birth.'

'Here?' he asked, with all that question implied.

She laughed. 'Not by choice, I promise you.'

He inclined his head. 'You are unusual.'

'Followed my man here, which was stupid.'

'I think I've heard this tale before,' said James with a rueful smile.

'Self-styled trader. Had a partner in Krondor. Landed here and made all manner of deals, then the partner neglected to send any of the goods promised. I woke up one morning alone, about two months ago, and haven't seen him since. I suspect he's either dead or chatting up another foolish girl in some distant city.'

James nodded. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty winters, and too old to be here.'

He grinned. 'Hardly. You're one of the most attractive dancers I've seen.'

She cocked her head. 'You looking for some private company?'

James considered, then nodded. 'But not quite yet.' As a flicker of disappointment crossed her face he opened his belt-purse and took out two silver coins. When he slid them across the table she scooped them up and secreted them about her before he could add, 'I may want the night.'

She brightened at that. 'Handsome young man like you, that's not a task.' Then her face took on a reflective look. 'Fact is, you don't strike me as a regular in these sorts of places.'

He laughed. 'I could surprise you.' Standing up, he added, 'Let's say that lodgings where no one is looking are sometimes useful.'

She nodded.

‘What’s your name?’

She glanced around the room to see who she might approach next, then said, ‘They call me “Jade” because I favour green.’ She leaned forward and said, ‘Truth is, I have only one other costume, and it’s also green. My name is Gina.’

He laughed. ‘Quegan name.’

‘My grandparents, but I was born in Sarth, then lived in Krondor. What’s your name?’

He smiled. ‘Call me . . . Jim.’ He inclined his head. ‘I’ll be back.’

‘I hope you will,’ she said, turning and walking away.

He admired the view as she moved away. He most certainly would be back. Spending the night with a beautiful woman was as good a way to hide from Keshian spies as any he could think of, not to mention it took your mind off the harsher aspects of life.

Glancing around the tavern, he picked up his indifferent ale, drained what was left of it, made for the door and vanished into the crowd.

James stretched and yawned as the greying light outside the window heralded the dawn. It was the time of day he loved best if he had managed to get some sleep. It was the time he hated most if he hadn’t, because he knew it was unlikely he’d see a bed for another day. This morning he decided he liked it more than not, even though he was tired. His fatigue was of his own devising and was the result of the most pleasant of diversions.

He saw that Gina had kicked off the blanket during the night and lay exposed for his appreciation. She had a remarkable curve to her back and buttocks that made him consider for a moment staying a little longer in bed, but the practical needs of the day trumped more immediate considerations, and he rolled out of bed.

His clothes lay in a jumble on the floor and he dressed quickly. The previous day’s efforts had been well spent, and were bearing fruit. Gina had turned out to be quite a bit brighter than one might expect of the average tavern dancer, and had few scruples when it came to spying. She didn’t know she was a spy yet, but James would unfold that all in good time.

She would be his first agent in Kesh. Durbin might not be a critical city from the Empire’s point of view, but it was of great interest to the Kingdom in the west, given that it was the Empire’s only port on the Bitter Sea and more trouble came through Durbin than every other port in the Empire combined.

Gina wasn’t educated, but she possessed a street-smart, intuitive ability that could not be taught. James, as Jimmy the Hand, had encountered every woman of low birth you could imagine: thieves, murderers, confidence tricksters, card cheats, whores, shop girls, and drudges. After entering the prince’s service, he had encountered women of high birth, and this much he knew: one woman in ten might have survived being abandoned by an idiot lover in Durbin and emerged as nothing worse than a tavern dancer. Most would either have ended up dead, or as slaves, or at best, as whores trapped in one of the innumerable brothels in this pest hole of a city.

James slapped Gina on her bare rump and she said, ‘What?’ in groggy tones.

‘I have a plan,’ he said lightly.

She sat up and looked at him through puffy, sleepy eyes.

It occurred to him that she might have the most beautifully shaped breasts he had encountered, and over the years the number he had seen was impressive. Defying the distraction, he said, ‘I think we should go into business.’

She looked at him with a narrow gaze, suddenly suspicious. ‘I’m listening.’

‘I reckon you are worth a great deal more than an occasional bed warmer for a merchant or trader.’

and that you can do better than being groped nightly for a fistful of coppers.'

~~She shrugged. She had heard her share of false promises from customers carried away by a night of pleasure. Many a man had left a dancer's bed determined to save her from a life of degradation, only to be barely aware of her name by the middle of the next day. Passion can inflame the imagination as much as it can the flesh.~~

He laughed. 'I can read your mind.'

'Oh, really?'

'I have no desire to save you.'

She feigned disappointment. 'And I was so hoping for that.'

He made his tone businesslike. 'You're obviously smarter than you let on. Do you know how to listen and not hear?'

She laughed. 'I listen to everything, yet I hear nothing.'

'Good,' he said. 'I would have you listen for me.'

She cocked her head, but said nothing.

'There's a moneylender in the small market by the Low Tide Gate, by the name of Jacob. You will go there and receive a small sum which, should anyone ask, was owed to you by a client who turned out to be honest, if not timely.'

She smiled. 'Then what?'

'Buy something pretty, perhaps a new costume in a colour other than green. Some bangles perhaps and the smallest dagger you can find, which you should secrete about your person.'

Her eyes narrowed even more. 'And?'

'Start looking around for a spot to open your own tavern.'

'Really?' Her eyebrows shot up. 'What sort of spot?'

'Away from the docks. I wouldn't want your current employer to think you were trying to take away his business.'

She nodded.

'Somewhere on the south side of the boulevard, perhaps halfway between the caravanserai gate and the governor's palace.'

She was silent for a while, then said, 'Some important people tend to congregate in those neighbourhoods, Jim.'

'Indeed,' said James. 'We'll be among them, but nothing too ostentatious. Somewhere among the great gambling halls, brothels and palaces scattered among the nicer establishments, we shall open a modest inn – the sort where those with their fingers on the edge of power are likely to need housing.'

She nodded. 'The sort of place a nobleman's baggage master or a wealthy merchant's agent might lodge – the sort who might let something of note slip with the aid of strong drink and a pretty woman to impress.'

'You're a natural.'

She frowned slightly. 'I have been asked to listen but not hear before, Jim. How dangerous is this going to be?'

'That depends on who you're not hearing while you're listening. Let's say,' he shrugged, 'it could cost you your life.'

She pulled back slightly, and the rising sun played across her face and shoulders. 'You know how to charm a girl, Jim. If my life's at risk, I trust you'll make it worth my while?'

'Your life is at risk every time you bring a man back here. You know that as well as I. You wouldn't be the first girl in Durbin whose customer decided to pay with a blade instead of coin. I'll make you more gold in the next few years than you could see in five lifetimes.'

'And if I refuse?'

‘We never had this conversation, and I think you’re smart enough not to cause me difficulty.’

She nodded. ‘I could betray you.’

‘There’s an old saying here,’ said James. ‘There are many holes in the desert, but there is always room for one more.’

‘A threat?’

‘A consequence.’

‘Let me think on it,’ she said. ‘I have no love for nations nor men of rank, but I do love gold.’

‘Smart,’ said James with a grin. ‘I shall only come by once, in three days’ time, and we shall share a drink. If you say nothing to me on this subject, we never had this discussion. If you decide before, go to Jacob the moneylender and tell him your name is Shareena. He will have your gold. Should circumstances warrant, I would enjoy another night here.’

He kissed her quickly on the cheek and left, knowing full well that she would be at the moneylender’s stall within a day, two at the most, and to all intents and purposes, James of Kronador, Court Knight to Prince Arutha, had just established his first agent in a Keshian city.

He opened the door, dodged into the early morning crowd and was gone.

Jacob the moneylender looked up at the desert man approaching his stall in the market and for a moment was confused: the desert men never borrowed coin, preferring to barter camels, goats, whatever they’d looted from travellers. Then as the figure came nearer Jacob recognized his features. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and repressed a groan. His bodyguard, a heavily muscled black-skinned former pit fighter from the shores of the Overn Deep cast his master a glance. Jacob said, ‘I’ll need a moment.’

The guard nodded and moved a discreet distance away as James reached the booth.

James raised a hand in greeting.

With his smile frozen in place, Jacob said, ‘Jimmy the Hand.’

‘Sir James.’

The evil smile remained in place. ‘Wave your hands around a little like a desert man, for the god’s mercy, or you’ll start drawing attention. A desert man wouldn’t be trying to haggle for coin, anyway. Are you trying to get us both killed?’

‘Then gesture like I’ve come to the wrong place and listen carefully, as I won’t repeat myself. First, I am here on the prince’s business, so from this point forward you’ll follow any instruction I give or send you. To know an order is from me, the code will be “Jimmy couldn’t come; he’s taken his sweetheart.” Second, a young woman calling herself Shareena will arrive here within the next couple of days. Account to her ten golden sovereigns or whatever coin of equal worth you choose, but give it to her without question or remark. Should she ask questions, you know nothing. Lastly, she may return to you in days to come, seeking a much larger amount to establish a business enterprise. It’s on my behalf, which means it’s on Prince Arutha’s behalf, so accommodate her as quickly as you can. When you account your expenses to the prince’s chamberlain, note these expenses as “payments to James Durbin on the Crown’s behalf”, and all will be well. You will be reimbursed within a month with a ten per cent commission added.’ He smiled and continued, ‘And if you do well in this, in a year or two you may be allowed to return to Kronador and live.’

‘Well, and good, the prince may lift the price on me,’ said Jacob, ‘but what about the Mockers?’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

James turned and left the stall, heading in the direction Jacob had pointed, content in knowing that his former tax collector in Kronador – who had fled in disgrace after betraying both his royal commission and his partners in crime in the Mockers – was now his second agent in Kesh. *Who knows, though, if he serves well, some day he may actually be allowed to return to Kronador.*

Whistling a nameless tune, he dodged through the crowds in the market.

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