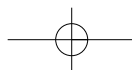


# AT THE GATES OF DARKNESS



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RAYMOND E. FEIST

*AT THE GATES  
OF DARKNESS*

*The Demonwar Saga  
Book Two*

HARPER  
*Voyager*



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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are  
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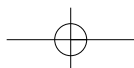
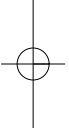
I also, once again, thank Jonathan Matson for far more than wise counsel and his business acumen, but for an abiding friendship which I cherish.

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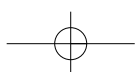


Lastly, and most deeply, to my children for their love and beauty; they still drive me crazy while keeping me sane and I am loving the adults they're turning into before my eyes.



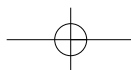


For the ladies who make me look so good: (in alphabetical order)  
Jennifer Brehl, Emma Coode, Jane Johnson, and Katherine  
Nitzel; rarely does an author get one good editor, let alone four.



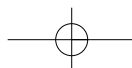
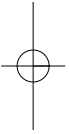


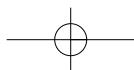
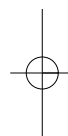
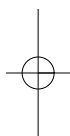
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• CHAPTER ONE •

## Sacrifice

*H*OWLS FILLED THE NIGHT.  
The blasted hills smoked and the stench of char filled the air. Hundreds of robed figures slowly wended their way between rocky debris to reach the huge clearing below the remains of a fortress gate tower. A powerful man stood silently on top of the pile of stones, looking down upon his followers.

Another figure waited in the shadows, using his considerable skill to remain unseen, and wishing fervently that he was anywhere else in the world but here. James Dasher Jamison took a slow, even breath, as much to calm himself as to catch his breath, and struggled to keep his wits about him. Within the courts of the three largest nations of the region, he was known as a minor noble of the Kingdom of the Isles; a man who had inherited, not earned, his rank, being the grandson of the Duke of Rillanon.

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To others he was Jim Dasher, a businessman involved in some petty criminal dealings in the city of Krondor; and to a few, he was known as the Upright Man, leader of the Thieves Guild: the Mockers. But even fewer knew James Dasher Jamison as the head of the Kingdom of the Isles intelligent apparatus, reporting directly to his grandfather.

In his forty or so years, Jim had seen many strange and terrifying things – experiences that came with his various positions. At times he feared he had become as heartless a bastard as those he had put down in the name of the Crown, or for the Conclave of Shadows, with whom he often worked; but even his lifetime of violence and intrigue could not have adequately prepared him for what he now saw before him.

A massive fire encompassed a circle of stakes, to which were tied four human sacrifices. They were not the first, already the dead numbered in the dozens, if not hundreds; but what churned Jim's stomach more than this terrible scene, was that the slain had seemed willing, even eager to embrace a painful, flaming death.

Around the edges of the clearing more victims dangled at the ends of ropes; moments before, Jim had witnessed them place the nooses around their own necks, and jump off small ladders, to hang themselves. Many necks had broken with an audible crack, but a few had died slowly, kicking for what had seemed far too long a time. Jim had seen more than his fair share of public hangings in Krondor, but this was far more horrific than a criminal reaping his just deserts. This was a chilling display of self-sacrifice to evil. The howls lessened as the masochists finally began to lose consciousness and die.

As Jim watched, sickened, another score were impaled on

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wooden stakes, their blood and faeces filling the air with the unforgettable stench of death. Some of them quivered and twitched as their own weight drove the stakes deeper into their bodies. Others gave out only one death spasm before they hung on the stakes, motionless.

Jim saw nothing sane here. He turned his attention to the man standing on top of the tumbled down masonry, who held his hands up in a welcoming gesture. The man's expression and bearing made Jim wish to turn tail and run away as fast and as far as he could. He had never seen this man before, but his description fit what he had learned from Pug of Sorcerer's Isle and a Demon Master named Amirantha: The man on the stones above was Belasco; one of the most dangerous men alive, and certainly one of the maddest.

With a sweep of his hand, the domineering magic user conjured a mirage, a shimmering likeness that hung in the air above his head, one that made the mob at his feet cry out in supplication and awe.

The image was Dahun, and from what Jim had learnt over the last six months, the appearance of his likeness, almost as if he stood here in the flesh, meant that his servants were closer to opening a portal for him.

Dahun was twenty feet tall and roughly man shaped, but he also possessed a long black, scaled lizard's tail, which descended from the base of his spine. His chest was massive and his stomach rippled with muscles under reddish skin that stretched from black at his feet and blended to crimson over his chest. His face was human, save for a massive, jutting lower jaw and large bat-like ears. His eyes were solid black orbs. Long tendrils of hair, braided with human skulls, hung to his shoulders. His brow was adorned

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with a massive golden circlet, set with a dark stone that pulsed with purple light. The fingers of his left hand ended in black talons and flexed restlessly, as if in anticipation of tearing his enemies apart. In his right hand he held a flaming sword. His hips were girded with a studded kilt, and two large leather bands crossed his chest with a massive golden emblem at their centre.

Jim spent a moment fixing the image in his memory. Then he glanced around and noted the slack jawed, empty eyed expression on the worshippers around him. It was clear they had been drugged in preparation for this ritual, so he attempted to mimic their shambling walk.

Feeling almost sick to his stomach, Jim steeled himself and slowly joined the people who were approaching the monster. Like them he wore a heavy black robe, but he had pulled the cowl forward to conceal his features. The original owner of the robe now lay at the bottom of a deep ravine less than a quarter mile away.

He shuffled his feet, moving slower than those around him to keep to the rear of the crowd; he wanted the opportunity to slip away easily should the need arise. He kept his hands inside the sleeves of his robe – one hand held a dagger treated with a fast-acting poison that would cause paralysis within a minute and the other a device which had been constructed for him by a master artificer in Krondor: a ball that when shattered would emit a blinding light for ten seconds, providing him more than enough time to get away. It would disable those around him for a few minutes, or at least the human onlookers, he couldn't be certain that everyone in attendance tonight was like him.

Jim swallowed hard again and paused, forcing himself to confront the vision of the monster above him.

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Belasco raised his hands again. Jim could easily see that the magic user was madder than a bug trapped in a bass drum. His demon projection was the most horrifying sight that Jim had ever witnessed, yet the magician was laughing like a delighted child. He was calling out to the faithful, but Jim wasn't quite close enough to hear his words, only the tone of his voice.

Jim inched to the right as the followers in front of him continued their slow progression forward; the group was coming together at the centre of what had once been a fortress. Perhaps five hundred of the faithful had gathered. Jim glanced around; a sudden tightness in his neck had caused him to worry about who might now be behind him. It was a sense he had inherited from his great-grandfather, something the family called his 'bump of trouble'. Right now it was starting to itch badly.

As he suspected, figures moved along the rocks that surrounded the flat central area of the ancient marshalling yard. The roaring fires at its edge made everything beyond their light difficult to see, but Jim had mastered the trick of not looking directly at the flames, and kept alert for flickering movement betraying those outside the light.

The name of this ancient Keshian fortress had been lost in time. Its walls and towers were mostly gone, crumbled like the masonry upon which Belasco stood, and only one underground entrance a few hundred feet away still led into its tunnels and caverns. Jim had no intention of entering that labyrinth. In his great-grandfather's day it had been known locally as The Tomb of the Hopeless. Legend told that an entire garrison had been left to die in there. It once commanded the entrance to what was called the Valley of Lost Men.

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Jim reoriented himself. To his right was a gap in the rocks that would grant him relatively fast access to a trail north: it was an abandoned caravan route that ended in the Keshian port city of Durbin. At the foot of these hills waited half a dozen of the deadliest thugs Jim could find. Five were cutthroats who occasionally worked for him in Durbin; the sixth was Amed Dabu Asam, his most trusted agent in the Jal-Pur desert region and the one he relied on to carry word back to Krondor should Jim not return by dawn.

To his left was an open expanse and then the sudden drop down of sheer cliffs. Only the gods knew what waited in the desolate valley below them, so should he have to bolt, Jim knew that he was certainly going to veer right.

He glanced around again, trying hard to look like just another devoted follower of the demon, mimicking the ritual movements of the others. He hoped his wary looks towards the archers hadn't attracted attention. He sensed that other things would start happening soon, all of them bad.

For over half a year Jim had been trying to find the lair of The Servants of Dahun, a group of outlaws known to others as The Black Caps. He had decided to investigate this ancient fortress whilst poring over the many reports from his great-grandfather's days.

Once home to a cult of fanatical assassins called the Nighthawks, the site had been considered abandoned for over a century. Obviously someone had decided that since no one was paying attention, it was time to reoccupy the fortress.

It was close enough to Krondor and the Empire city of Durbin to allow the murderous dogs quick and easy access, and remote enough that the chance of discovery was small. Jim had almost

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been killed twice, getting here, and now was counting the seconds of borrowed time that he had remaining.

He considered the tale of his ancestor facing down a cult of assassins here, with almost no help. Jim would take a fortress full of assassins over this mob of religious fanatics any day. The assassins might kill you, but at least it would be swift, but these lunatics would probably slow roast him over a fire and eat him.

Finally, Jim was close enough to hear Belasco's words. 'We are here to give blood and life to our master!'

As one the assembled mob chanted, 'Hail Dahun!'

Jim instinctively took a step back, checking first to his right, then the left. The crouching figures on the rocks surrounding the area were archers. He began sidestepping towards the closest boulder, which stood a very distant twenty feet to his right.

With two more rapid steps, Jim reached a deep shadow beneath an overhanging rock. He had to crouch, which made removing his robe more difficult, but in seconds he was almost invisible within the tiny pool of concealing darkness. He reached back and from behind his neck pulled a thin hood over his head that left only his eyes exposed. The material he wore was dull black, with dark metal fastenings. He gripped his dagger and waited.

Belasco shouted, 'Rejoice! Know that your sacrifice brings our master closer to us!'

As he spoke, the archers crouching in the rocks rose up and began firing at the worshippers. Most stood stunned as those next to them fell. The eeriest aspect to Jim was their silence. A muffled exhalation of breath, or just a faint grunt of pain; no one screamed or cried out. The wind whipped up the dust, and Jim could only catch glimpses of their faces, but none of them showed any fear.

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They stood like sheep, waiting quietly until a bow shaft found their mark.

Jim didn't need to see any more. He crept along under the rock and slipped behind it, circling until he was behind the archer perched above his hiding place. There was ten feet of open ground he needed to cross to reach his next cover and he didn't hesitate. All eyes were on the worshippers falling around Belasco's feet, but Jim knew that very soon they would all be dead and that the archers would then start checking for survivors. He was determined to be as far away as possible before that moment.

Jim reached the second shadow and looked around. Seeing no one nearby, he sprinted across another open space and cut between two large rocks marking the entrance to a game trail that would lead him down a short incline to the old caravan route to Durbin. The eerie sound of the desert wind deepened Jim's apprehension as he half ran, half stumbled down the trail.

His nearly out-of-control flight caused him to bowl over a black-clothed figure waiting at the bottom of the trail. The two men went down in a tangle of arms and legs and Jim almost plunged his knife into the figure before he recognized him. 'Amed!'

'Peace, my friend,' said the Keshian agent as he regained his feet.

'What are you doing here?'

'When you failed to return, I thought to follow, in case you needed aid.'

Jim glanced upward and said, 'What I need now is to get as far from here as quickly as possible. Horses?'

'Down the road a little,' said the spy. 'I thought it reckless of you to come on foot, so I brought along a spare.'

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Jim nodded, and followed his companion. He had insisted on approaching the ancient fortress on foot, as all the supplicants were walking and a rider would have stood out. Suddenly, Jim thought he saw a movement above and behind them and with a quick tug on Amed's shoulder, had him kneeling at his side. Pointing upward, he nodded once.

The nod was returned and Amed signalled his route up. Practiced in ambush, both men knew almost instinctively what the other would do. Jim would head back the way he came while his companion would loop around, to approach the possible stalker from behind. Jim waited to see if anyone was coming down the trail, and after ensuring that Amed was in place, he started back up the path.

Reaching the top of the trail, he found Amed kneeling, inspecting the ground in the moonlight. 'I can't be sure,' said the Keshian spy, 'but I think whoever followed you turned back when you headed down to the caravan road.' He said, 'Do we follow?'

'No,' said Jim. 'I need to report back as soon as possible.'

'Magic?'

Jim smiled. 'I wish. Those devices are only loaned out when necessary and lately, some of the older ones have stopped working. Pug is trying to find a way to restore them, but it looks as if a lot of Tsurani art is being lost.'

Amed shrugged. 'I know little of the Tsurani, few ever venture this far south. And I have no desire to visit LaMut.'

'It is a less than captivating city,' said Jim. 'Let's be on our way.'

As they made their way to where the horses waited, a man hidden deep in shadows watched their departure. He waited until they

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were far enough down the old caravan route then turned to trot silently back into the night. Reaching the clearing now strewn with bodies, he found Belasco waiting for him.

The mercenary said, 'Master, it is as you predicted.'

The magician smiled but there was nothing akin to humour in his expression. 'Good. Let Jim Dasher return to Kronedor with his tale of bloodshed and dark magic.'

'Master,' said the killer. 'I do not understand.'

'I wouldn't expect you to,' said Belasco as he sat on top of the rock on which he had been standing. He looked at the carnage around him. 'Sometimes you have to put on a demonstration to show your opponents what you're capable of accomplishing.'

'Again, I do not understand. You instruct?'

'Ambition?' said Belasco, regarding the mercenary with a narrow gaze. 'I'm not sure I like that.'

'I do as you bid,' said the man, lowering his head.

'Where are you from? You speak oddly.'

The mercenary smiled broadly, revealing teeth filed to points. 'I am of the Shaskahan, master.'

Brightening up at that, Belasco said, 'Ah! The island cannibals! Lovely.'

'Yes, I will instruct. Sometimes you wish your opponent to think they are ahead. Other times not. This time, I want them to concentrate on bloody murder and dark magic, as if I were just another mad necromancer like my brother.'

'This is to serve Dahun, master?'

'Of course,' answered Belasco annoyed by the question. 'Just not in the way you think.' He stood up. 'Get the horses,' he shouted. 'We ride south!'

The mercenaries moved with precision. Of all the hired

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murderers he had at his disposal, this group was the most unswerving in their obedience and loyalty. The fanatics had their uses, but were too willing to die for their ‘god,’ and at the moment Belasco needed men who were willing to kill and reluctant to die.

‘Eventually,’ said Belasco quietly, ‘Jim Dasher and his masters will decide that the time has come to investigate the Valley of Lost Men. We shall have to prepare another distraction for them when they do.’

With that he leaped down from the rock and hurried to where a mercenary held his horse. Mounting, he looked around to see that all was as he wished it. The fires would burn for hours, and the embers would remain hot for a day or more. The smoke and stench of death would drape this plateau for a week, but eventually the hot desert winds and the scavengers would reduce everything to dust and dry bones, and even the charred wood and dry bones would eventually be carried away.

He signalled and led his men down the steep trail into the Valley of Lost Men.

Sandreena, Knight-Adamant of the Order of the Shield of the Weak, waited at the docks. Her orders had been simple: meet with a Kingdom noble. She had no idea of who it would be, but she had been told that he would recognize her. She didn’t know if he had met her before or simply been provided with a description; there weren’t many members of the Order who were tall blonde women.

A pair of men covered in road dust approached. Their faces were obscured by the trailing edges of their keffiyehs that formed a covering for their noses and mouths – not unusual for men

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riding in from the Jal-Pur. Despite the oppressive heat, Sandreena stood motionless in her armour, her shield slung across her back and her sword within easy reach.

The taller of the two men came to stand before her and handed her a bundle of parchment. 'For Creegan,' was all he said before he turned and walked toward the end of the dock where a Kingdom trading vessel waited.

She wondered who this mysterious nobleman might be, but as he was probably disguised as a local trader, she knew that the situation did not warrant scrutiny. Father-Bishop Creegan was only forthcoming with the information she needed to ensure the success of her missions. Apparently, in this case all she needed to know was that those papers needed to reach Krondor.

She moved towards the stable yard where her horse waited. If the unknown nobleman needed her to ride to Krondor with his missive, then his ship was bound for another destination. She put aside her musing and stopped at a local stall. She would need a week's provisions and several skins of water, for Durbin was three day's ride from the first oasis, and Kingdom town of Land's End another four days from there.

Not looking forward to the task before her, but resolute in her devotion to her duty, she paid for the dried meat, dried fruit and roasted grain that would be her only sustenance for the coming week. She also needed a week's worth of grain, as there would be no fodder for her mount along the way.

Considering her assignment, she let her curiosity about the unknown Kingdom noble fade away.

Jim stood on the deck of the *Royal Sparrow*, a message cutter that had been turned out to look like a small coastal trader, renamed

*Bettina* for the duration. The crew were among the finest sailors and marines Jim could steal from Admiral Tolbert's fleet, each trained personally by Jim at one time or another. They were forty-five of the hardest, most dedicated and dangerous fighting men afloat on the Bitter Sea, and Jim had been grateful for their skills and loyalty on more than one occasion.

He considered his chance meeting with Sandreena. Dressed as a court noble, he was unrecognizable to her, but covered in dirt, with three day's growth of beard, he had risked that she might remember him as the Mocker who had sold her into slavery years before. He was grateful for the keffiyeh he wore, and relieved that he hadn't been forced to avoid being killed as he tried to explain his role in the period of her life that she'd most like to forget. Instead he considered himself lucky to now be surrounded by those loyal to him and the Crown, who would ensure he reached his destination safely.

Like Amed, the crew were among the few men Jim would trust his life to; they would follow him to the lower hells. And given what he had seen over the last month, that was very likely to be their destination.

Overhead, a nasty squall was finally leaving the small ship behind, as it moved eastward towards the distant city of Krondor. The storm had seemed to come over them in waves, and they had endured four days of bad weather in a row. Jim ignored the drenching he had received on deck, and waited to get close enough to the island to disembark.

In the distance, through the gloom, he could make out the dark, looming castle on the bluffs overlooking the one approachable cove on Sorcerer's Isle. The sight filled Jim with a vague foreboding, as it had the first time he had seen it. He knew from

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experience that the feeling was a very subtle magic employed by Pug, the Black Sorcerer, and that it would pass once he entered the premises. He noticed that the magical, evil-looking blue light in the northernmost tower was absent, and had been replaced by a relatively benign looking yellow glow, as if a only a stout fire burned within.

Jim waited until Captain Jenson, master of the ship, gave the orders to reef sails and drop anchor before he indicated he was ready to go ashore. He was now dressed in a simple, utilitarian fashion – woollen tunic and trousers, a broad belt with sword and knife, high boots, and a large flop hat – all well-made despite their simplicity. He entered the longboat as it was lowered over the side and waited until the first breakers drove it into the shallows to jump out. He was already soaked to his small clothes, so waiting for the men to pull the boat ashore seemed unnecessary.

He was impatient to talk to Pug and his advisors, especially the Demon Master, Amirantha, and he hoped to unburden himself; he wanted the intelligence he carried to be someone else's problem. He had Keshian spies to catch, competing criminal gangs to crush, and a court life that had been neglected for far too long.

He waded ashore, ignoring the water sloshing into his boots. The route from the beach was short and divided quickly. To the left the trail meandered up and over a ridge, then down into a vale where the sprawling estate, Villa Beata, had rested. Guttled by fire in an attack a year before, it now lay abandoned, a testament to the wickedness of Belasco and his minions. To the right lay the stony path which led up to the black castle.

He trudged up the path, now regretting his impulsive jump

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into the surf, as the water had knotted his stockings in his boots. Even with the rain, they had managed to stay dry until he jumped into the water. Not only would he have some serious polishing to do to save the fine leather boots from the predations of seawater, he would have a heroic set of blisters to show for his impatience, as well.

Sighing in resignation, he wondered if one of the inhabitants of the black castle might have a balm for his feet when he reached the gate. He crossed over a rickety looking drawbridge, which despite its dilapidated appearance, was well-maintained and sturdy.

The castle itself was a study in theatricality. Originally constructed by Macros, the first Black Sorcerer, it had been built using magic out of a blackish stone, shot through with steel grey. The looming gatehouse had the look of an open maw, as if any who entered would be devoured. The empty courtyard was weed choked and dusty, and the twin doors to the castle stood ajar.

Jim knew as well as those who lived here that the decision to relocate from the villa to this miserable haven was part of a ruse, to let Belasco think that the Black Sorcerer and the Conclave of Shadows had been humbled and driven into the old fortress where they huddled in fear, waiting for the next assault.

The truth was much more complex than that.

As he entered the forlorn looking castle, Jim reflected on his changing relationship with these people over the last year. The relationship between the Conclave of Shadows and the Jamison family had been difficult for twenty years. Jim's great-grandfather, the legendary Jimmy the Hand, later Lord James of Krondor, had married Pug's foster daughter Gamina. In a sense, they were distant family, but along the way a division had slowly developed.

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Jim crossed the empty great room, crossing before the massive fireplace. In ages past, this type of castle would have housed as many as a hundred members of a noble family, their retainers and families, and on especially cold nights they would have gathered in this one room. He paused for a moment and considered the attention to detail undertaken by Macros the Black in constructing this place. Anyone exploring this near ruin would assume it had been built ages before its actual erection.

He mounted the stairs leading to the one tower he knew to be occupied and wondered how his great-grandfather would have viewed the current situation. By all reports of his nature, Jim concluded that he would have been both annoyed and amused by it.

Pug had shamed the Prince of Kronдор at that time, later King Patrick, disavowing his loyalty to the Kingdom of the Isles and virtually daring the Kingdom to assert its claim on the island duchy of Stardock, in the Vale of Dreams.

Jim knew there had also been some dispute with those running Stardock on Pug's behalf at that time, as well. Whatever the true cause, Pug had then withdrawn to this island with his family and retainers. He had also begun the Conclave of Shadows, the secret organization that had become a major part of Jim's life, despite his original wish to have nothing to do with it.

Reaching the top landing, Jim paused and thought about his report. He carried the most dire intelligence, but he was about to make an important choice.

The relationship between the Jamison family and the Conclave became strained when Jim's grandfather had been summoned to the King's court and elevated to the rank of Duke of Rillanon.

## AT THE GATES OF DARKNESS

At times during his grandfather's administration of the capital city – and by extension of the Kingdom itself – conflicts of interest had arisen between the Conclave and the Kingdom. James of Rillanon, like his grandfather before him, had been steadfast in his loyalty to the Kingdom of the Isles.

Jim reflected that it might have been simpler for his great-grandfather; in those days the aims of the Stardock magicians and the Kingdom were more or less in harmony. He wondered if Jimmy the Hand would have looked at this situation the same way Jim did.

Jim's father, William Jamison, and his uncle Dasher had both died in the border wars with Kesh when Jim was a boy, and his great uncle Dashel had no surviving sons. By the time he was twenty years of age, Jim Dasher Jamison was the sole surviving heir to the family, and both his grandfather and great uncle had marked him.

Jim pushed aside the memory of the ruse his forbearers used to persuade him to take control of all the criminal activity along the Bitter Sea coast, as well as taking charge of the Kingdom's intelligence services. He had found he had a knack for both and had made the criminal activities serve the Kingdom's interest, but that hadn't made wearing two caps at the same time any easier.

And now he was on the verge of more responsibility, as a fully committed agent of the Conclave. Pushing open the door to the tower's common room, he wondered if he was making the right choice.

He pushed open the door and was confronted by two young women knitting, while a third placed wood on a fireplace set in the opposite wall. Three men huddled close to the fire speaking

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quietly. One young magician recognized him and said, 'Jim Dasher, welcome!'

Jim nodded a return greeting and said, 'Jason.' He glanced around. 'Where is everyone else?'

'Scattered,' said Jason, pushing his long blond hair back from his forehead. 'Pug's sent many of the younger students home or to Stardock, the rest have been moved to safe locations. A few of us have stayed to keep a lookout for any more trouble and convey messages. What do you require?'

'I need to speak to Pug,' said Jim, not bothering to mask his impatience. He held up a sphere of dull golden metal. 'This doesn't work. I had to take a fast ship from Durbin to get here.'

The magician took the sphere and said, 'The Tsurani transport spheres . . . We've not had any new ones in years.' He looked at it and his tone was regretful. 'I fear most of the artificers who made them perished on Kelewan. The few who survived . . .' He shrugged. 'Most of those we have are decades old, my friend,' Jason said softly.

Jim knew that the few Tsurani magicians who survived now struggled with the rest of their people on their new home world, or were perhaps living quietly in LaMut. And, without saying as much, Jason had implied that if the Conclave had access to newer devices, Jim would have had them.

Feeling a fool, Jim said, 'Yes. You're right. Now, may I speak with Pug?'

'Pug's not here,' said Jason.

'Where is he?'

Glancing over at his companions the young magician's tone was apologetic. 'We don't know. We haven't seen him for nearly a month now.'



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Jim said, 'Then I need to speak with Magnus.'

'He's gone as well,' said Jason. 'Come, sit by the fire and rest. We have means of sending word, but it may take some time.'

'By some time, do you mean hours or days?' asked Jim, pulling off his leather gauntlets and moving to a stool near the fire.

Jason only shrugged, and Jim felt his frustration return in full. He knew his crew would wait until he sent word or returned, so he felt little need to move away from the warming fire. Thinking of nothing better to do, he sat back against the cold stones, removed his boots, and wondered just where the two magicians might be.

