

King of Foxes

Raymond E. Feist

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Extract

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• CHAPTER ONE •

Return

A BIRD SOARED OVER THE city. Its eyes sought out a figure in the throng on the docks, one man amidst the teeming surge of humanity occupying the harbour-side during the busiest part of the day. The Port of Roldem, harbour to the capital city of the island kingdom of the same name, was one of the most crowded in the Sea of Kingdoms. Trade goods and passengers from the Empire of Great Kesh, the Kingdom of the Isles, and half a dozen lesser nations nearby came and went daily.

The man under scrutiny wore the travel clothes of a noble, all sturdy weave and easily cleaned, with fastenings which allowed him to remain comfortable in all weathers. He sported a jacket designed to be worn off the left shoulder, leaving his sword arm unencumbered. Upon his head was a black beret adorned with

a silver pin and a single grey feather, and upon his feet he wore sturdy boots. His luggage was being offloaded and would be conveyed to the address he had specified. He travelled without servant, which while unusual for a noble was not unheard of – for not all nobles were wealthy.

He paused for a brief second to drink in the sights. Around him people scurried: porters, sailors, stevedores, and teamsters. Wagons loaded so high their wheels appeared on the verge of buckling rolled slowly by him, cargo heading into the city or out to the ferry barges which would load them onto outbound ships. Roldem was a busy port by any standard; not only were goods delivered here, but also transhipped, for Roldem was the trading capital of the Sea of Kingdoms.

Everywhere the young man looked he saw commerce. Men bargaining over the cost of goods to be sold in distant markets, others negotiating the price of offloading a cargo, or insuring one against pirates or loss at sea. Still others were agents of trading concerns eagerly watching for any sign that might prove an advantage to their sponsors, men who sat in coffee houses as far away as Krondor or as close as the Traders Exchange, just one street away from where the young man now stood. They would dispatch young boys with notes who would run to those men who awaited news on arriving cargo, men trying to sense a shift in a distant market before buying or selling.

The young man resumed his walk, and avoided a gang of urchins dashing past with determined boyish purpose. He forced himself not to pat his purse, for he knew it was still where it was supposed to be, but there was always the possibility the boys were sent by a gang of pickpockets on the look-out for a fat purse to rob. The young man kept his eyes moving, seeking out

any potential threat. He saw only bakers and street vendors, travellers and a pair of guardsmen. It was exactly who he would have expected to see in the crowd on Roldem's docks.

Looking down from above, the soaring bird saw in the press of the crowd that another man moved along a parallel course and at the same pace as the young noble.

The bird circled and observed the second man, a tall traveller with dark hair who moved like a predator, easily keeping his eye upon the other man, but using passers-by as cover, dodging effortlessly through the crowd, never falling behind, but never getting close enough to be discovered.

The young noble was fair-skinned, but sun-browned, his blue eyes squinting against the day's glare. It was late summer in Roldem and the dawn mists and fog had fled, burned off by mid-morning to a brilliant sunny sky, made tolerable by a light wind off the sea. Trudging up the hill from the harbour, the noble whistled a nameless tune as he sought out his old quarters, a three-bedroomed flat above a moneylender's home. He knew he was being followed, for he was as adept a hunter as any man living.

Talon of the Silver Hawk, last of the Orosini, servant of the Conclave of Shadows, had returned to Roldem. Here he was Talwin Hawkins – distant cousin to Lord Seljan Hawkins, Baron of the Prince's Court in Kronador. His title was Squire of Morgan River and Bellcastle, Baronet of Silverlake – estates producing almost no income – and he was vassal to the Baron of Ylith; a former Bannerette Knight Lieutenant under the command of the Duke of Yabon, Tal Hawkins was a young man of some rank and little wealth.

For almost two years he had been absent from the scene of

his most significant public triumph, winning the tournament at the Masters' Court, thus earning the title of World's Greatest Swordsman. Cynical despite his youth, he tried to keep the illusion of superiority in perspective – he had been the best of the several hundred entrants who had come to Roldem for the contest, but that hardly convinced him he was the best in the world. He had no doubt there was some soldier on a distant battlefield, or mercenary riding guard-duty somewhere who could cut him up for fish-bait given the chance; but fortunately they hadn't entered the contest.

For a brief instant, Tal wondered if fate would allow him to return to Roldem in three years' time to defend that championship. He was but twenty-three years of age, so it would only be circumstance that would prevent him from returning to Roldem. Should he do so, he hoped the contest would be less eventful than the last. Two men had died by his sword during the matches – a very rare and usually regrettable outcome. Nevertheless Tal had felt no regret, since one of the men had been among those responsible for the destruction of his nation, and the other had been an assassin sent to kill him. Memories of assassins turned his mind to the man following him. The other man had also boarded at Salador, yet had managed to avoid direct contact with him aboard the small ship for the duration of the voyage, despite their being nearly two weeks at sea.

The bird wheeled overhead, then pulled up, wings flapping as it hovered, legs extended downward and tail fanned, as if watching prey. With its telltale cry, the predator announced its presence.

Hearing the familiar screech, Tal looked up, then hesitated for a moment, for the bird above the throng was a silver hawk. It was his spirit guide and had given him his naming vision. For

an instant Tal imagined he could see the creature's eyes and hear a greeting. Then the bird wheeled and flew away.

'Did you see that?' asked a porter nearby. 'Never seen a bird do that.'

Tal said, 'Just a hawk.'

'Never seen a hawk that colour, leastways not around here,' answered the porter who took one look at where the bird had hovered then returned to lugging his bundle. Tal nodded, then moved back into the throng. The silver hawk was native to his homeland far to the north, across the vast Sea of Kingdoms, and as far as he knew, none inhabited the island kingdom of Roldem. He felt troubled, and now by more than the presence of the man who had followed him from Salador. He had been subsumed so long in the role of Tal Hawkins that he had forgotten his true identity. Perhaps the bird had been a warning.

With a mental shrug he considered that the bird's appearance might have been nothing more than a coincidence. While still an Orosini at heart, in all ways he had been forced to abandon the practices and beliefs of his people. He still owned a core being – Talon of the Silver Hawk – a boy forged in the crucible of a nation's history and culture; but he had been shaped and alloyed by fate and the teachings of outlanders so that at times the Orosini boy was no more than a distant memory.

He wended his way through the press of the city. Shops displayed colourful fashions as he entered a more prosperous part of the city. He lived at just the right level to convince everyone he was a noble of modest means. He was charming enough and successful enough as Champion of the Masters' Court to warrant invitations to the very best Roldemish society had to offer, but had as yet to host his own gala.

Reaching the door to the moneylender's home, he reflected wryly that he might crowd half a dozen close friends into his modest apartment, but he could hardly entertain those to whom he owed a social debt. He knocked lightly upon the door and then entered.

The office of Kostas Zenvanose consisted of little more than a tiny counter and there was barely enough room to stand before it. A clever hinge allowed the counter to be raised at night and put out of the way. Three feet behind the counter a curtain divided the room. Tal knew that behind the curtain lay the Zenvanose family living-room. Beyond that lay the kitchen, bedrooms, and exit to the back courtyard.

A pretty girl appeared and her face brightened with a smile. 'Squire! It's wonderful to see you again.'

Sveta Zenvanose had been a charming girl of seventeen when Tal had last seen her. The passing two years had done nothing but turn a pretty lass into a burgeoning beauty. She had lily-white skin with a hint of rose on her high cheekbones and eyes the colour of cornflowers, all topped off with hair so black it shone with blue and violet highlights when struck by the sun. Her previously slender figure had also ripened, Tal noted as he quickly returned her smile.

'My lady,' he said with a slight bow. She began to flush, as she always had when confronted by the notorious Tal Hawkins. Tal kept the flirtation to a minimum, just enough to amuse the girl, but not enough to pose any serious issues between himself and the girl's father. While the father posed no threat to him directly, he had money, and money could buy a lot of threats. The father appeared a moment later, and as always Tal wondered how he could have sired a girl as pretty as Sveta. Kostas

was gaunt to the point of looking unhealthy, which Tal knew was misleading, for he was lively and moved quickly. He also had a keen eye and a canny knack for business.

He moved swiftly between his daughter and his tenant, and smiled. ‘Greetings, Squire. Your rooms have been readied, as you requested, and I believe everything is in order.’

‘Thank you.’ Tal smiled. ‘Has my man put in an appearance?’

‘I believe he has, otherwise you have an intruder above who has been banging around all day yesterday and this morning. I assume it’s Pasko moving the furniture to dust and clean, and not a thief.’

Tal nodded. ‘Am I current with our accounts?’

As if by magic, the moneylender produced an account ledger and consulted it, with one bony finger running down the page. With a nod and an ‘ah’ he said, ‘You are most certainly current. Your rent is paid for another three months.’

Tal had left the island nation almost two years previously, and had deposited a sum of gold with the moneylender to keep the apartment against his return. He had judged that if he didn’t return within two years, he’d be dead, and Kostas would be free to rent out the rooms to someone else.

‘Good,’ said Tal. ‘Then I will leave you to your business and retire. I expect to be here for a while, so at the end of the three months, remind me and I’ll advance more funds against the rent.’

‘Very well, Squire.’

Sveta batted her lashes. ‘Good to see you home, Squire.’

Tal returned the obvious flirtation with a slight bow and smile, and fought down a sudden urge to laugh. The rooms above were no more his home than was the palace of the King. He had no

home, at least he hadn't since the Duke of Olasko had sent mercenaries to destroy the land of the Orosini. As far as Tal could judge, he was the sole surviving member of his people.

Tal left the office. One quick glance around the street told him that the man who had followed him from the ship was out of sight, so he mounted the stairs next to the door, climbing quickly to the entrance to his rooms. He tested the door and found it unlocked. Stepping in he was confronted by a dour-looking man with a droopy moustache and large brown eyes.

'Master! There you are!' Pasko said. 'Weren't you in on the morning tide?'

'Indeed,' replied Tal, handing his jacket and travel bag to his manservant. 'But as such things are wont to be, the order of landing was dictated by factors of which I am ignorant.'

'In other words, the ship's owner didn't bribe the harbour-master enough to get you in early.'

'Most likely.' Tal sat down on a divan. 'So expect the luggage to arrive later today.'

Pasko nodded. 'The rooms are safe, master.' Even in private, Pasko observed the formalities of their relationship: he the servant, Tal the master, despite the fact that he had been one of Tal's instructors over the years.

'Good.' Tal knew that meant Pasko had employed various wards against scrying magic, just as he would have inspected the premises against more mundane observation. The chances of their enemies knowing that Tal was an agent of the Conclave of Shadows were small, but not out of the question. And they had sufficient resources to match the Conclave in dealing with opponents.

Since his victory over Raven and his mercenaries, avenging

his own people's slaughter, Tal had lived on Sorcerer's Isle, recovering from wounds – both mental and physical – learning more of the politics of the Eastern Kingdoms, and simply resting. His teaching had continued in various areas, for Pug and his wife, Miranda, had occasionally instructed him in areas of magic that might concern him. Nakor the Isalani, the self-proclaimed gambler who was far more than that, instructed him in what only could be termed 'dodgy business', how to cheat at cards and spot others cheating, how to pick locks and pockets, as well as other nefarious skills. With his old friend Caleb he would go hunting. It had been the best time he had known since the destruction of his people.

During that period he had been allowed to glimpse some of the dealings of the Conclave on a level far above his station; and had thus gained the sense that the Conclave had agents numbering in the hundreds, perhaps thousands, or at least had links to thousands of well-positioned individuals. He knew the organization's influences reached down into the heart of the Empire of Great Kesh, and across the sea to the lands of Novindus, as well as through the rift to the Tsurani home world, Kelewan. He could tell that enormous wealth was at their disposal, for whatever they needed always appeared somehow. The false patent of nobility that Tal carried in his personal portfolio had cost a small fortune, he was sure, for there were 'originals' in the Royal Archives on Rillanon. Even his 'distant cousin' Lord Seljan Hawkins had been delighted to discover a long-lost relative who had been victorious in the Masters' Court, according to Nakor. Tal didn't feel emboldened enough to ever visit the capital of the Kingdom of the Isles, because while the elderly Baron might believe that some distant cousin had fathered a lad who had

some versatility with the sword, the possibility of Tal failing to be convincing when it came to small-talk about this or that family member made such a visit too risky to contemplate.

Still, it was reassuring to know that these resources lay at his disposal should he need them. For he was ready to embark upon the most difficult and dangerous portion of his personal mission to avenge his people: he had to find a way to destroy Duke Kaspar of Olasko, the man ultimately responsible for the obliteration of the Orosini nation. And Duke Kaspar happened to be the most dangerous man in the world, according to many sources.

‘What news?’ asked Pasko.

‘Nothing new, really. Reports from the north say that Olasko is again causing trouble in the Borderlands, and may be once more seeking to isolate the Orodon. They still send patrols through my former homeland to discourage anyone who might think to claim Orosini lands.’ Then he asked, ‘What is the news in Roldem?’

‘The usual court intrigues, master, and quite a few rumours of this lady and that lord and their dalliances. In short, with little of note to comment upon, the nobles, gentry and wealthy commoners turn their attention to gossip.’

‘Let’s confine ourselves to matters of importance. Any sign of Olasko’s agents here in Roldem?’

‘Always. But nothing out of the ordinary, or at least nothing we can see that’s out of the ordinary. He builds alliances, seeks to do favours in exchange for social debts, loans gold, and insinuates himself in the good graces of others.’

Tal was silent for a long moment. Then he asked, ‘To what ends?’

‘Pardon?’

Tal leaned forward in his chair, elbows on knees. ‘He’s the most powerful man in the Eastern Kingdoms. He has blood ties to the throne of Roldem – he’s, what? Sixth in line of succession?’

‘Seventh,’ replied Pasko.

‘So why does he need to curry favour with Roldemish nobility?’
‘Indeed.’

‘He doesn’t need to,’ said Tal, ‘which means he wants to. But why?’

‘Lord Olasko is a man with many irons in the fire, master. Perhaps he has interests here in Roldem which might require a vote of the House of Lords?’

‘Perhaps. They ratify treaties enacted by the Crown, and verify succession. What else do they do?’

‘Not much else, save argue over taxes and land.’ Pasko nodded. ‘Given that Roldem is an island, master, land is of great importance.’ He grinned. ‘Until someone discovers how to build dirt.’

Tal grinned back. ‘I’m sure we know a few magicians who could increase the size of the island if they felt the need.’

Pasko said, ‘So, what are we doing back in Roldem, master?’

Tal sat back and sighed. ‘Playing the role of bored noble looking to find a better station in life. In short, I must convince Kaspar of Olasko I’m ready to take service with him by creating a muddle here that only he can get me out of.’

‘Such as?’

‘Picking a fight with a royal seems a good choice.’

‘What? You’re going to smack Prince Constantine and provoke a duel? The boy’s only fifteen years of age!’

‘I was thinking of his cousin, Prince Matthew.’

Pasko nodded. Matthew was the King's cousin. He was considered the 'difficult' member of the royal family; more arrogant, demanding and condescending than any other member of the King's family, he was also a womanizer, a drunk and he cheated at gambling. Rumour had it that the King had bailed him out of very difficult straits on a number of occasions. 'Good choice. Kill him and the King will privately thank you . . . while his executioner is lopping off your head.'

'I wasn't thinking of killing him, just . . . creating enough of a fuss that the King would be unhappy with me remaining in his country.'

'You'd have to kill him,' said Pasko dryly. 'As Champion of the Masters' Court you could probably sleep with the Queen and the King would pass it off as a boyish prank. Why do you need all this bother? Olasko offered you a position when you won the tourney.'

'Because I wish to appear the reluctant petitioner. I would have undergone close scrutiny had I accepted his offer immediately after the tourney two years ago. If I were to appear suddenly requesting that position today, I would undergo an even closer examination. But if I'm merely forced by circumstances to seek out his patronage, then my motives are obvious – at least I hope they are.'

'While at Sorcerer's Isle, I was . . . prepared, to withstand a great deal of examination.'

Pasko nodded. He understood what was being said. Tal had been conditioned by Pug and the other magicians to deal with any magic that might uncover his true allegiance.

'But the circumstances of my seeking service with Kaspar must also be credible. Being in his debt for my life seems an obvious motive.'

‘Assuming he can keep you off the headsman’s block.’ Pasko rubbed his throat. ‘I’ve always thought beheading a barbaric choice. Now, the Kingdom hangs its felons. A short drop –’ he snapped his fingers ‘– and the neck is broken, and it’s over. No mess, no fuss, no bother.’

‘In Great Kesh, I’ve been told, they have many different choices of execution, depending on the location and nature of the crime: decapitation, burning at the stake, being buried up to your neck next to an anthill, drowning, exposure, being pulled apart by camels, being buried alive, defenestration –’

‘What?’

‘That’s throwing someone off a very high place onto the rocks below. My personal favourite is castration, then being fed to the crocodiles in the Overn Deep after having watched them first consume your manhood.’

Tal stood up. ‘Have I ever mentioned that you have a seriously morbid streak? Rather than contemplate the means of my demise, I’ll spend my energies on staying alive.’

‘Then, to a practical concern?’

Tal nodded.

‘While I suspect Duke Kaspar would intervene on your behalf in such a circumstance – the humiliation of Prince Matthew, I mean, not the feeding to crocodiles thing . . .’

Tal smiled.

‘. . . isn’t it going to be difficult for him to do so from across the seas?’

Tal’s smile broadened. ‘Nakor had intelligence from the north just as I left Salador; Duke Kaspar arrives within the week for a state visit.’

Pasko shrugged. ‘In aid of what?’

‘A little hand-holding for his distant cousin, I imagine, prior to doing something that might otherwise earn the King’s displeasure.’

‘Such as?’

‘We have no idea, but the north is constantly on a low roil, and Kaspar only has to raise the heat in one place or another for a kettle to boil over somewhere. That’s one of the many things I wish to find out.’

Pasko nodded. ‘Shall I draw you a bath?’

‘I think I’ll take a walk to Remarga’s and indulge in a long massage and tub there. Bring suitable clothing for an evening in town.’

‘Where will you be dining, master?’

‘I don’t know. Somewhere public.’

‘Dawson’s?’ The former inn was now exclusively a dining establishment for the noble and the rich, and had spawned a dozen imitators. ‘Dining out’ had become something of a pastime for those in the capital city.

‘Perhaps that new establishment, the Metropol. It’s considered the place to be seen, I have been told.’

‘It’s a private club, master.’

‘Then get me an invitation while I bathe, Pasko.’

With a wry expression, Pasko said, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘I must be seen in public so word will spread I’m back in the city, but I need to be alone tonight when I finish supper and return to these quarters.’

‘Why, master?’

‘So I can find out who’s been following me since I left Salador, and what’s on his mind.’

‘A spy?’

With a stretch and a yawn, Tal said, 'Probably an assassin.'
Sighing, Pasko said, 'So it begins.'
Nodding as he headed for the door, Tal said, 'Yes. So it begins.'

Fog shrouded the city. Mist hung so thick it was impossible to see more than three feet ahead. The bright lamps at each corner of the merchants' quarter were reduced to dim yellow spots in the distance, and even the occasional lantern beside a tavern door became just a faint pool of light across the street. There were places on long streets where no light was visible, and the senses were confounded, distances were meaningless and the entirety of the universe was murk.

Even sound was muted. The taverns he passed offered just a murmur of voices rather than the raucous cacophony normally heard. Footfalls were a soft grinding of heel on caked mud rather than a clatter of leather on stone.

Even so, Tal Hawkins knew he was being stalked. He had known that the instant he had departed Lady Gavorkin's home. He had lingered over dinner at the Metropol – it had taken only minutes for Pasko to gain an invitation on behalf of the owner of the establishment for the Champion of the Masters' Court to dine as his guest – and Tal had left with a free membership in the club. He had been impressed with the décor, the ambiance and the service. The food was only just acceptable, and he planned on having words with the chef, but he could see this club business might be a useful enterprise.

Roldem lived on commerce more than any nation in the east, and this new club was in a location where nobles and wealthy commoners could come together in casual surroundings to

socialize in a fashion impossible to imagine anywhere else in the city. Tal suspected that over the coming years fortunes would be lost and titles gained, marriages arranged and alliances formed in the quiet interior of the Metropol. Even before he had finished dining, a note from Lady Gavorkin had been handed to him, and Tal judged it as likely he would encounter his stalker on his way to her townhouse as he would back to his own. He had not, however, been accosted by whoever followed, and had spent a pleasant two hours, first being scolded for his long absence, then being ardently forgiven by Lady Gavorkin.

The lady was recently widowed, her husband having perished in a raid against a nest of Ceresian pirates operating out of an isolated bay off Kesh. His service to the Roldemish Crown had garnered Lady Gavorkin a fair amount of sympathy, some guarantees of a modest pension in addition to her ample estates and holdings, and an appetite for a new husband as soon as the proper mourning period had been observed. She was childless, and her estates stood at risk if the Crown decided that another noble would better able manage them. Ideally, from the royal perspective it would be ideal that Lady Gavorkin, Countess of Dravinko, should marry some other noble who was favoured by the Crown, which would tie up two loose ends nicely.

Tal knew he would have to sever all contact with Lady Gavorkin soon because he would never withstand the close scrutiny reserved for those marrying into Roldemish nobility. A minor squire's son from a town outside a distant Kingdom city who was socially acceptable as an escort for galas and festivals was one thing, but someone who wed the widow of a recently departed war hero was another matter entirely. Besides, being tied down to anyone, even someone as attractive as Lady Margaret Gavorkin, held

limited appeal for Tal, her substantial wealth, holdings, and energetic lovemaking notwithstanding.

Tal listened as he walked and let his hunter's instincts serve him well. He had learned years earlier that a city was nothing but a different kind of wilderness, and that the skills he had learned as a child in the mountains to the far north, across the sea, could keep him alive in any city. Each place had its own rhythm and pace, its own dynamic feeling, and once he was comfortable within that environment, threats and opportunities for a hunt would be recognized, just as they were in the wild.

Whoever followed him was desperately trying to keep a proper distance and would have gone unnoticed by anyone less keenly aware of his surroundings than Tal. Tal knew this area of the city as well as anyone born here, and he knew he would be able to lose his stalker at whim. But he was curious as to who was following him, and more to the point, why.

Tal paused for half a step, just enough of a break in the rhythm of his walking for his stalker to reveal his whereabouts, then continued. He turned right at the corner, and stepped inside a deep doorway, the entrance to a tailor shop he had frequented. Forgoing his sword, he deftly removed a dagger from his belt and waited. At the moment Tal expected, the man following him turned the corner and stepped in front of him.

Tal reached out and grabbed the man's right shoulder, bearing down and twisting as he pulled. The man reacted, but Tal was quicker; the stalker did exactly as Tal anticipated, hesitating for an instant before reflexively pulling away. Tal yanked upward using the man's own motion to spin him completely around. Suddenly the stalker found himself hard against the door with Tal's dagger at his throat.

‘Why are you following me?’ Tal asked, his voice a hissed whisper lest he arouse those asleep upstairs above the shop.

The man was quick, for his hands were moving towards his own dagger before the last syllable was uttered. He was also no fool, for he recognized he was in a hopeless situation a scant moment before Talon would be forced to plunge the blade into his throat. He slowly raised his hands to show they were empty. In a whisper, he answered, ‘Magnificence! I mean you no harm! My sword and dagger are still at my belt!’ He spoke in the language of the Kingdom of the Isles.

‘Who are you?’

‘I am Petro Amafi.’

‘Amafi? That’s Quegan. But you speak the language of the Isles.’

‘I have resided in Salador many years now and, to tell the truth, my command of the Roldemish tongue is lacking, so I employ the King’s Tongue.’

‘Tell me, Amafi, why are you following me?’ Tal repeated.

‘I am an assassin by trade. I have been paid to kill you.’

Tal took a step back, leaving his blade against the man’s throat, but gaining a perspective on him.

Petro Amafi was a half-head shorter than Tal’s two inches over six feet, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. His clothing marked him as a foreigner; he wore a curious long tunic, gathered at the waist by a black leather belt, and rather than the long wide-bottomed trousers affected by the style-conscious in Roldem this season, he wore leggings and a courtier’s slippers. He sported a moustache and goatee and upon his head he wore a felted wool beret with a clasp and feather on the left side. His face was narrow, with deep eyes that revealed his menace more

than his vulpine appearance. ‘You mean me no harm, but you’re an assassin sent to kill me. Something of a contradiction, don’t you agree?’ observed Tal.

‘I gain nothing by hiding the truth, Magnificence. My life is preserved by your ignorance. Should you kill me this moment, you will wonder who hired me.’

Tal chuckled. ‘That is true. So, then, we are at an impasse, for should you tell me, then I must kill you. So it is to your benefit not to tell me. But as I cannot spend the rest of my life waiting for you to divulge who sent you, so I gain nothing by keeping you alive.’

‘Wait!’ said Amafi, holding out his hand in a conciliatory gesture. ‘I did not come to kill you. I was hired to do so, but I have been observing you since nearly a week before you departed Salador and I wish to bargain.’

‘For your life?’

‘More, Magnificence. Let me serve.’

‘You’d take service with me?’ said Tal in dubious tones.

‘Willingly, Your Magnificence. Any man of your skills would be a worthy master, for I have seen you duel in the Court of Blades in Salador, and I’ve watched from the corner as you play cards in the ale houses; you win just enough to raise no suspicions, yet you are a master cheat. You are welcome in the homes of the great and near-great. You are admired by men and desired by women. What’s more, no one has ever done what you just have, turned me from hunter to hunted. But most telling of all, you are Champion of the Masters’ Court, the greatest blade in the world, and a rumour circulates that you are secretly in the service of Duke Kaspar of Olasko, and one who serves such as Kaspar can only prosper greatly. I wish to prosper greatly with you.’

He gently moved the tip of Tal's blade away from his throat with one finger, and Tal permitted it. 'As you can see, Magnificence, I am getting on in years, nearly sixty of them. The assassin's trade requires skills that are fading as I age. I must think of my latter days, and while I have kept some part of the fees paid me over the years, it is not enough. I have fallen on hard times.'

Tal laughed. 'Bad investments?'

Amafi nodded. 'A trading concern out of Salador, most recently. No, I wish to take my bloody skills and use them to a more permanent advantage. Were I your man, then I would rise with you. Do you see?'

Tal put away his dagger. 'How can I trust you?'

'I will swear an oath in whatever temple you require.'

Tal considered. Few men would willingly break oath, even if they weren't as honour-bound as the Orosini. 'Who told you I was in Kaspar's service?'

'A rumour here, there, nothing more. You were reported to have been seen in the region of Latagore where Duke Kaspar has interests, and it is well known he sought you out after you won the competition at the Masters' Court two years ago. Duke Kaspar employs only the most gifted and ambitious young men, so it is assumed you are his.'

'Well, I'm not,' replied Tal, intentionally turning his back on Amafi. He knew he took a risk, for as much as the assassin claimed age was slowing him down, Tal judged him capable of a swift attack from behind if given the opportunity. The attack didn't come.

Instead, Amafi fell into step beside Tal. 'You wish to know who sent me?'

'Yes,' replied Tal.

'Lord Piotre Miskovas, though I am not supposed to know this.'

‘He does hold a grudge,’ observed Tal. ‘I haven’t slept with his wife in more than two years.’

‘As I understand it, she became intoxicated at a gala given by Lady Amsha Detoris, and threw the facts of your . . . liaison into her husband’s face over supper some months after you last left the city. The couple are yet not reconciled and she abides in her suites here in the city, while he resides at their estates in the country. He blames you.’

‘He should look to his own philandering,’ remarked Tal, ‘for had he not been so quick to bed every pretty face he saw, his wife would not have been so eager to receive my attentions.’

‘Perhaps, Magnificence, but it takes a man of unusual character to openly confront his own shortcomings. It’s so much more convenient to blame others.

‘Upon hearing of your planned return, he sought out an assassin – far less discreetly than he should have – and I was hired to remove this –’ he pointed at Tal ‘– blot on his honour. He was at least intelligent enough to have used a . . . broker . . . in Salador, lest blame fall upon him here in Roldem. I have “failed”, so I am honour-bound to return his gold, and seek to turn this failure into a triumph. Employ me, Magnificence, and I will serve you. My oath upon it!’

Tal considered his next move. He had been back in Roldem for less than a day and needed reliable eyes and ears. ‘Until such time as you can successfully betray me without risk?’

Amafi grinned. ‘Possibly, my lord, for I have never been a man of constant heart. But oath-breaking does not come easily even to one such as me, and given your rare talents I suspect such a time would never exist, for it would require an opportunity to become even richer than I hope to become in your service.’

Tal laughed. Amafi had a refreshing candour that made Tal think he could trust the assassin – up to a point, anyway – and as long as he didn't attempt to press him beyond that point, he should prove a reliable servant. 'Very well, let us to the Temple of Lims-Kragma, where you will swear an oath.'

Amafi grimaced. 'I was thinking perhaps Ruthia or Astalon,' he said, naming the Goddess of Luck and the God of Justice.

'I think wagering your chance at being reborn to a higher station a good hedge against betrayal,' said Talon, putting away his weapon. 'Come along. And, we must work on your Roldemish. We may be here a while.'

If Amafi thought even for an instant to draw his weapon and strike, he masked the impulse completely, quickly moving to fall into step beside his new master as they vanished into the fog shrouding the city.

The magician stood in the corner, his features veiled in shadow. Tal knew his face even if he couldn't see it in the gloom. A single candle burned in the apartment, and that was on the table in the next room, casting a faint light through the open door.

'Where's your new man?' he asked.

Tal said, 'I sent him on an errand. What did you find out?'

Stepping out of the shadows, the magician revealed himself to be a tall man of lean features, a striking face with a long straight nose, dramatic cheekbones and startling blue eyes. His hair was so pale, it appeared almost white. He said, 'Informants in Queg have vouched for Amafi. At least they have vouched for his reputation as an assassin.'

'A reputable assassin,' said Tal. 'That's a quaint notion.'

‘He’s considered something of an “honourable” man in the context of his trade,’ declared Magnus, son of Pug of Sorcerer’s Isle, and one of Tal’s many teachers over the years.

‘It’s beginning,’ said Tal. ‘Lady Gavorkin confirmed last night that Duke Kaspar is to arrive by week’s end and will be ensconced in the palace with his cousin the King. Pasko? How many invitations arrived today?’

‘Seventeen, master,’ he answered.

‘By month’s end, I imagine I will be in a position to make the re-acquaintance of the Duke at one gala or another.’

‘Your plan?’ asked Magnus.

‘I need to establish a link with Kaspar, then find a reason to call out Prince Matthew.’

‘Is that necessary?’

‘Almost certainly,’ said Tal. ‘For while I’m vague on the details I think I have anticipated Duke Kaspar’s larger goals in his manoeuvrings over the last few years.’

‘This is something you didn’t mention before leaving the island,’ said Magnus.

Tal nodded. ‘Because I didn’t fully see the pattern until a few hours ago. And I may be wrong, but I believe all his actions in the north to be nothing more than a bloody, murderous ruse, and his anticipated invasion of the Kingdom through Farinda a feint.’

‘To what end?’

‘To keep the Kingdom busy up north while he works towards his true goal in the south.’

‘And that is . . . ?’ asked Magnus impatiently.

‘I have no idea. But it could involve Roldem or Kesh, and keeping the Kingdom occupied along a long, empty border would work to Kaspar’s advantage.’

‘I’m no military expert, but it seems to me if he sends a force into the Kingdom of the Isles, they will respond in strength. If Kaspar sends in small companies, each can occupy a much larger force if they scatter across the plains. From the foothills at the border to the Blackwood north of Dolth, you’ve got almost a thousand miles of grasslands. King Ryan of the Isles would be forced to tie up a huge number of men hunting down a relatively small army.

‘So, the question is, if Kaspar wants that army up in the grasslands, where does he plan on striking?’

Magnus said, ‘I will convey your theory to Father.’ He put a broad-brimmed felt hat on his head, and removed a device from within his dark grey robe, an orb that glowed with copper highlights in the candlelight. He depressed the surface with his thumb and suddenly he wasn’t there, the only sign of his departure being a small inrush of air.

Pasko said, ‘But why?’

‘Why?’ echoed Tal. ‘Why what?’

‘Why all the plotting? Kaspar is as powerful in his own way as the King of Roldem. He effectively rules Aranor; the Prince does his bidding. He either controls or intimidates every nation surrounding Olasko, and he has the King of Roldem’s ear. Why does he want this war with the Isles?’

Tal sat back. ‘I thought it obvious. By destabilizing the region, opportunity arises for Kaspar to gain what he wants most of all.’ Tal laced his fingers together and stared at the candle over balled fists. He tapped his chin lightly with his hands as he muttered, ‘Men of power seek only one thing: more power.’