

Shadowspawn

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HIS MOP OF hair was blacker than black and his eyes nearly so, under brows that just missed meeting above a nose not quite falcate. His walk reminded some of one of those red-and-black gamecocks brought over from Mrsevada. They called him Shadow-spawn. No compliment was intended, and he objected until Cudget told him it was good to have a nickname—although he wished his own weren't Cudget Swearoath. Besides, Shadowspawn had a romantic and rather sinister sound, and that appealed to his ego, which was the largest thing about him. His height was almost average and he was rangy, wiry; swiftly wiry, with those bulgy rocks in his biceps and calves that other males wished they had.

Shadowspawn. It was descriptive enough. No one knew where he'd been spawned, which was shadowy, and he worked among shadows. Perhaps it was down in the shadows of the 'streets' of Downwind and maybe it was over in Syr that he'd been birthed. It didn't matter. He belonged to Sanctuary and wished it belonged to him. He acted as if it did. If he knew or suspected that he'd come out of Downwind, he was sure he had risen above it. He just didn't have time for those street-gangs of which surely he'd have been chieftain.

He was no more sure of his age than anyone else. He might have lived a score of years. It might have been fewer. Had a creditable moustache before he was fifteen.

The raven-wing hair, tending to an indecisive curl, covered his ears without reaching his shoulders. He'd an earring under that hair, on the left. Few knew it. Had it done at fourteen, to impress her who took his virginity that year. (She was twoscore-and-two then, married to a man like a building stone with a belly. She's a hag with a belly out to here, now.)

"The lashes under those thick glossy brows of his are so black and thick they look almost kohled, like a woman's or a priest over in Yenized," a man called Weasel told Cusharlain, in the Vulgar Unicorn. "Some fool made that remark once, in his presence. The fellow wears the scar still and knows he's lucky to be wearing tongue and life. Should have known that a bravo who wears two throwing knives on his right arm is dangerous, and left-handed. And with a name like Shadowspawn...!"

His name was not Shadowspawn, of course. True, many did not know or no longer remembered his name. It was Hanse. Just Hanse. Not Hanse Shadowspawn; people called him the one or the other or nothing at all.

He seemed to wear a cloak about him at all times, a thoughtful S'danzo told Cusharlain. Not a cloak of fabric; this one concealed his features, his mind. Eyes hooded like a cobra's, some said. They weren't, really. They just did not seem directed outward, those glittering black onyxes he had for eyes. Perhaps their gaze was fixed on the plank-sized chips on his shoulders. Mighty easily knocked off.

By night he did not swagger, save when he entered a public place. Night of course was Hanse's time, as it had been Cudgel's. By night... "Hanse walks like a hungry cat," some said, and they might shiver a bit. In truth he did not. He glided. His buskins' soft soles lifting only a finger's breadth with each step. They came down on the balls of the feet, not the heels. Some made fun of that not to Hanse—because it made for a sinuous glide strange in appearance. The better-born watched him with an aesthetic fascination. And some horripilation. Among females, highborn or otherwise, the fascination was often layered with interest, however unwilling. Most then said the predictable: a distasteful, rather sexy animal; that Hanse, that Shadowspawn.

It had been suggested to him that a bit of committed practice could make him a real sword-slinger: he was a natural. Employment, a uniform ... Hanse was not interested. Indeed he sneered at soldiers, at uniforms. And now he hated them, with a sort of unreasoning reason.

These things Cusharlain learned, and he began to know him called Shadowspawn. And to dislike him. Hanse sounded the sort of too-competent young snot you step aside for—and hate yourself for doing it.

“Hanse is a bastard!” This from Shive the Changer, with a thump of his fist on the broad table on which he dealt with such as Hanse, changing loot into coin.

“Ah.” Cusharlain looked innocently at him. “You mean by nature.”

“Probably by birth too. A bastard by birth and by nature! Better that all such cocky snotty stealthy arrogant bravos were stillborn!”

“He’s bitten you then, Shive?”

“A bravo and a lowborn punk he is, and that’s all.”

“Punk?”

“Well... perhaps a cut above punk.” Shive touched his moustachioes, which he kept curled like the horns of a mountain goat. “Cudget was a damned good thief. The sort of fellow who made the trade honourable. An art form. A pleasure doing business with. And Hanse was his apprentice, or nearly, sort of... and he has the potential of being an even better thief. Not man—thief.” Shive wagged a finger made shiny by wax. “The potential, mind you. He’ll never realize it.” The finger paused on its way back to stroke one moustachio.

“You think not,” Cusharlain said, drawing Shive out, pulling words from a man who knew how to keep his mouth shut and was alive and wealthy because he did.

“I think not. He’ll absorb a foot or so of sharp metal long before. Or dance on the air.”

“As, I remind you, Cudget did,” Cusharlain said, noting that within the trade no one said ‘hanged’.

Shive took umbrage. “After a long career! And Cudget was respected! He’s respected still.”

“Umm. Pity you admire the master but not the apprentice. He could use you, surely. And you him. If he’s a successful thief, there’ll be profit for the fence he chooses to—”

“Fence? Fence?”

“Sorry, Shive. The Changer he chooses to exchange his... goods with, for Rankan coin. There’s always a profit to—”

“He cheated me!”

So. At last Shive admitted it. That’s how he’d been bitten by this Hanse. Fat and fifty and the second most experienced Changer in Sanctuary, Shive had been cheated by a cocky youngster. “Oh,” Cusharlain said. He rose, showing Shive a satirical little smile. “You know, Shive... you shouldn’t admit that. You are after all a man with some twenty years experience... and he has only that many years of life, if not less.”

Shive stared after the customs inspector. An Aurveshan raised in Sanctuary and now employed by their mutual conqueror, Ranke. As well as by an informal league of Changers and Sanctuary’s foremost thieves; those so successful they employed other thieves. With a distinct curl of his lip—a cultivated artificial manoeuvre—and a brush of his double-curved left moustachio, Shive returned his attention to the prying of a nice ruby from its entirely too recognizable setting.

Just now Cusharlain’s prowling the Maze was in service of still another employer, for he was an ambitious and ever-hungry man. An amenable man, to opportunities for profit and new contracts. Today he was merely collecting information about the former apprentice of Cudget Swearoath, who had been swung shortly after the new Prince-Governor came out from Ranke to “whip this

Thieves' World of a town into shape". Above bribery, beyond threat, the (very) young ass actually meant to govern Sanctuary! To clean it up! Young Kadakithis, whom they called Kittycat!

So far he had angered the priesthood and every thief and Changer in Sanctuary. And a good three-fifths of the taverners. And even a number of the garrison soldiers, with those baby-clean, revolting competent Hell Hounds of his. Some of the old villa-dwellers thought he was just wonderful.

Probably wets his bed, Cusharlain thought with a jerk of his head—at the same time as he expertly twitched his robe's hem away from the touch of a legless beggar. Cusharlain knew very well that the fellow's legs were single-strapped up under his long, long, tattered coat. Well, and well. So one boy of nineteen or twenty, a thief, hated another, a half-brother of the Emperor sent out here because it was the anus of the Empire, good and far from the Rankan imperial seat! This the customs inspector had learned today, while gathering information for his secretive and clandestine employer. Hanse, Hanse. In all his life this Hanse had held regard for one person other than his cocky self: Cudget Swearoath. Respected senior thief. And Cudget had been arrested, which certainly would not have happened in the old days. The days BDP, Cusharlain thought; Before this Damned Prince! Far more incredibly, if there could be grades of incredibility, Cudget had been hanged!

Prince Stupid!

"Ah, the lad knows he can't hope to do injury on the prince," someone had told the night proprietor of the Golden Lizard, who had told Cusharlain's old friend Gelicia, proprietor of the popular House of Mermaids. "He schemes to steal from the very Prince-Governor, and make a quick large profit in the doing."

Cusharlain stared at her. "This young gamecock means to try to rob the very palace?" he said, feeling stupid instantly; so she'd said, yes.

"Don't scoff, Cushar," Gelicia said, waving a doughy hand well leavened with rings. This noon she was wearing apple-green and purple and lavender and mauve and orange, all in a way that exposed a large portion of her unrivalled bosom, which resembled two white cushions for a large divan and which Cusharlain was singularly uninterested in viewing.

"If it can be done, Shadowspawn'll do it," she said. "Oh, go ahead, tip yourself some more wine. Did you hear about the ring he tugged from under Corlas's pillow—while Corlas's head was on it, sleeping? You know, Corlas the camel-dealer. Or've you heard tell of how our boy Hanse dumb up and stole the eagle off the roof of Barracks Three for a lark?"

"I wondered what had happened to that!"

She nodded wisely with a trembling of chin and a flashing wing of earrings whose diameter was the same as his wine-cup—which was of silver. Her wine-cup, that is; the one he was using. "Shadowspawn," she said, "as Eshi is my witness. Had a prodigal offer from some richie up in Twand, too—and do you know Hanse wouldn't take it? Said he liked having the thing. Pisses on it every morning on rising, he says."

Cusharlain smiled. "And... if it can't be done? Reaching the palace, I mean."

Gelicia's shrug imparted to her bosom a quake of seismic proportions. "Why then Sanctuary will be minus one more cockroach, and no one'll miss him. Oh, my Lycansha will moon for a while, but she'll soon be over it."

"Lycansha? Who's Lycansha?"

Nine rings flashed on Gelicia's hands as she sketched a form in the air exactly as a man would have done. "Ah, the sweetest little Cadite oral-submissive you ever laid eyes on, who fancies that leanness and those midnight eyes of his, Cusher. Like to... meet her? She's at liberty just now."

"I'm on business, Gelicia." His sigh was carefully elaborate.

"Asking about our little Shadowspawn?" Gelicia's meaty face took on a businesslike expression, which some would have called crafty-furtive.

"Aye."

"Well. Whoever you're reporting to, Cusher—you haven't talked to me!"

"Of course not, Gelicia! Don't be silly. I haven't talked with anyone with a name, or an address, or a face. I enjoy my... relationship with some of you more enterprising citizens"—he paused for her mirthful snort—"and have no wish to jeopardize it. Or to lose the physical attributes necessary to my availing myself of your dear girls from time to time."

Her snickering laugh rose and went on up to whoops about the time he reached the street, assuring him that eventually the successful Gelicia had got his parting joke. Red Lanterns was a quiet neighbourhood this time of day, after the sweeping up of the dust and tracks of last night's customers. Now sheets were being washed. A few deliveries made. A couple of workmen were occupied with a broken door-hasps at a House down the street. Cusharlain squinted upwards. The Enemy, a horrid white ball in a horrid sky going the colour of turmeric powder laced with saffron, was high, nigh to passing noon. One-Thumb should be stirring himself about now. Cusharlain decided to go and have a talk with him, too, and maybe he could get his report made by sunset. His employer did not seem as long on patience as on funds. The customs inspector of a fading city whose chief business was theft and the disposal of its product had learned the former, and was ever at work on increasing his share of the latter.

"DID WHAT?" THE startlingly good-looking woman said. "Roaching? What's roaching mean?"

Her companion, who was only a little older than her seventeen or eighteen years, stiffened his neck to keep from looking anxiously around. "Sh—not so loud. When do cockroaches come out?"

She blinked at the dark, so-intense young man. "Why—at night."

"So do thieves."

"Oh!" She laughed, struck her hands together with a jangling of bangles—gold, definitely—and touched his arm. "Oh, Hanse, I know so little! You know just about everything, Don't you." Her face changed. "My, these hairs are soft." And she left her hand on that arm with its dark, dark hairs.

"The streets are my home," he told her. "They birthed me and gave me suck. I know quite a bit, yes."

He could hardly believe his luck, sitting here in a decent tavern out of the Maze with this genuinely beautiful Lirain who was ... by the Thousand Eyes and by

Eshi, too, could it be?—one of the concubines the Prince-Governor had brought over from Ranke! And she's obviously fascinated with me, Hanse thought. He acted as if he sat here in the Golden Oasis every afternoon with such as she. What a coincidence, what great good fortune to have run into her in the bazaar that way! Run into her indeed! She had been hurrying and he'd been turning, glancing back at one of those child-affrighters of Jubal's, and they had slammed together and had to cling to each other to avoid falling. She had been so apologetic and in seeming need to make amends and—here they were, Hanse and a palace conky unguarded or watched, and a beauty at that—and wearing enough to support him for a year. He strove to be oh so cool.

"You certainly do like my gourds, don't you."

"Wha—"

"Oh, don't dissemble. I'm not mad. Really, Hanse. If I didn't want 'em looked at I'd cover 'em in high-necked homespun."

"Uh... Lirain, I've seen one other pearl-sewn halter of silk in my life, and it didn't have those swirls of gold thread, or so many pearls. I wasn't this close, either." Damn, he thought. Should have complimented her, not let her know my interest is greed for the container!

"Oh! Here I am, one of seven women for one man and bored, and I thought you were wanting to get into my bandeau, when what you really want is it. What's a poor girl to do, used to the flatteries of courtiers and servants, when she meets a real man who speaks his real thoughts?"

Hanse tried not to let his preening show. Nor did he know how to apologize, or to fancy-talk beyond the level of the Maze. Besides, he thought this pout-lipped beauty with her heart-shaped face and nice woman's belly was having some fun with him. She knew that pout was irresistible!

"Wear high-necked homespun," he said, and while she laughed, "and try not to look that way. This real man knows what you're used to, and that you can't be interested in Hanse the roach!"

Her expression became very serious. "You must not have access to a mirror, Hanse. Why don't you try me?"

Hanse fought his astonishment and made swift recovery. With prickly armpits and outward confidence, he said, "Would you like to take a walk, Lirain?"

"Is there a more private room at the end of it?"

Holding her gaze as she held his, he nodded.

"Yes," she said, that quickly. Concubine of Prince Kadakithis! "Could anything as good as this bandeau be bought in the bazaar?"

He was rising. "Who'd buy it? No," he said, puzzled at the question.

"Then you must buy me the best we can find after a short search." She chuckled at the sight of his stricken face. The cocky creature thought she was a whore, to charge him some trifle like any girl! "So that I can wear it back to the palace," she said, and watched understanding brighten that frightening yet sensuous pair of onyxes he wore for eyes, all hard and cold and wary. She slid her hand into his, and they departed the Golden Oasis.

"OF COURSE I'M sure. Bournel!" Lirain twitched off the blue-arabesqued bandeau of green silk Hanse had bought her, and hurled it at the man on the

divan. He grinned so that his big brown beard writhed. "He has such needs. He is never relaxed, and wants and needs so badly, and so wants to be and to do. He is so impressed with who or rather what I am, and yet he would deny under torture that I was anything but another nice tumble. You and I both well know about low-borns who hunger for far more than food! He is completely taken in and he'll be the perfect tool. Bourne. My agent assured me that he is a competent sneak-thief, and that he wants to rob and gain a leg on Prince Kittycat so badly he can taste it. I saw that, right enough. Look, it's perfect!"

"A thief. And competent, you say." Bourne scratched his thigh under the tunic of his Hell Hound's uniform. He glanced around the apartment she occupied on nights when the prince might come—hours from now. "And he has a valuable halter of you now, to sell. Perhaps to brag about and get you into trouble. That kind of trouble ends in death, Lirain."

"You find it hard to admit that I a woman—have accomplished this, love? Look here, that gourd-holster was stolen today in the market-place. Sliced through in back and snatched off, in a single act. Some child of about thirteen, a dirty girl who ran off with it like a racing dromedary. I did not tell anyone because I so hated its loss and am so mortified."

"All right. Maybe. That's not bad—forget the part about its being sliced in back, lest it turn up whole. Hmm—I guess it won't. Likely perfectly good silk will be dumped while the pearls and gold thread are sold. And how competent was he at the couching, Lirain?"

Lirain looked to the heavens. "O Sabellia, and we call Thee the Sharp-Tongued One! Men! Plague and drought. Bourne, can't you be more than a man? He was ... fair. That's all. I was on business. We are on business, love. Our assignment for those "certain interested nobles" back in Ranke—my hind leg, it's the Emperor himself, worried about his half-brother's pretty golden-haired magnetism!—is to embarrass His pretty golden-haired Highness Kadakithis! He's been doing that well enough all by himself! Trying to implement civilized law in this roach-nest of a town! Continuing to insist that temples to Savankala and Sabellia have to be mightier than the one to the IIs these people worship, and that Vashanka's must be equal to IIs's. Priests hate him and merchants hate him and thieves hate him—and thieves make this town go!"

Bourne nodded—and demonstrated his strength by drawing a fifteen-inch dagger to clean his nails.

Lirain tossed her girdle of silver links on to a pile of cushions and idly fingered her navel. "Now we provide the finishing touch. There will never be a threat to the Emperor from this pretty boy's supporters again! We help Hanse the roach into the palace."

"After which he is absolutely on his own," he said, pointing with the dagger. "We've got to be uncompromised."

"Oh," she said flaunting, "I shall be a-couching with His Highness! The while, Hanse steals his Rod of Authority: the Savankh of Ranke, given him personally by the Emperor as symbol of full authority here! Hanse will wish to negotiate a private, quiet trade with Kittycat. Rod for a fat ransom, and his safety. We will be busily seeing that word gets around. A thief broke into the palace and stole the

Savankh! And the Prince-Governor is the laughing stock of the capital! He'll either rot here—or, worse still, be recalled in disgrace.”

The big man lounging so familiarly on her divan nodded slowly. “I do have to point out that you may well rot here with him.”

“Oh, no. You and I are promised reprieve from this midden-heap town. And... Bourne... particularly if we heroically regain the Savankh for the honour of the Empire. After its theft is just terribly well known, of course.”

“Now, that's good!” Bourne's brows tipped up and his lips pursed, a rather obscene spectacle between the bushiness of brown moustache and beard. “And how do we do that? You going to trade this Hanse another halter for it?”

She looked long at him. Coolly, brows arched above blue-lidded eyes. “What's that in your hand. Guardian; Hell Hound so loyal to His Highness?”

Bourne regarded the dagger in his big hairy hand, looked at Lirain, and began to smile.

THOUGH HARDLY BELOVED nor indeed particularly lovable, Hanse was a member of the community. Though a paid ally, the customs inspector was not. Hanse heard from three sources that Cusharlain had been asking after him, on behalf of someone else. After giving that thought, Hanse traded with a grimy little thief. First Hanse reminded him that he could easily take the five truly fine melons the boy had been so deft as to steal, all in an afternoon. The boy agreed to accept a longish, stiffish piece of braided gold thread, and Hanse gained four melons. With his hilt and then thumb, Hanse made a nice depression in the top of each. Into each he tucked a nice pearl; four of his thirty-four.

These he set before the hugely fat and grossly misnamed Moonflower, a S'danzo who liked food, melons, pearls, Hanse, and proving that she was more than a mere charlatan. Many others were. Few had the Gift. Even the cynical Hanse was convinced that Moonflower had.

She sat on a cushioned stool of extra width and sturdy legs. Her pile of red and yellow and green skirts overflowed it, while disguising the fact that so did her vast backside. Her back was against the east wall of the tired building wherein she and her man and seven of their brood of nine dwelt, and wherein her man sold... things. Hanse sat cross-legged before her. Looking boyish without his arm sheaths and in a dusty tunic the colour of an old camel. He watched a pearl disappear under Moonflower's shawl into what she called her treasure chest. He watched the melon disappear between her lavender-painted lips. Swiftly.

“You are such a good boy, Hanse.” When she talked, Moonflower was a kitten.

“Only when I want something, passionflower.”

She laughed and beamed and tousled his hair for he knew that such talk pleased her. Then he told her the story. Handed her, disguised in carefully smudged russet, a strip of silken cloth: two straps and two cupped circles bearing many thread-holes.

“Ah! You've been visiting a lady in the Path of Money! Nice of you to let Moonflower have four of the pearls you've laboriously sliced off this little sheath!”

“She gave it me for services rendered.” He waved a hand.

“Oh, of course. Hmm.” She folded it, unfolded it, fondled it, drew it through her dimple-backed hands, sniffed and tasted it with a dainty tongue-tip. A gross

kitten at her divining. She closed her eyes and was very still. As Hanse was, waiting.

“She is indeed a c—what you said,” she told him, able to be discreet even though in something approaching a trance. “Oh, Shadowspawn! You are involved in a plot beyond your dreaming. Odd—this must be the Emperor I see, watching from afar. And this big man with your—acquaintance. A big man with a big beard. In a uniform? I think so. Close to our ruler, both. Yet... ahh... they are his enemies. Yes. They plot. She is a serpent and he a lion of no little craft. They seek... ah, I see. The Prince-Governor has become faceless. Yes. They seek to cost him face.” Her eyes opened to stare wide at him, two big garnets set amid a heavy layer of kohl. “And you, Hanse my sweet, are their tool.”

They stared at each other for a moment. “Best you vanish for a time, Shadowspawn. You know what becomes of tools once they are no longer needed.”

“Discarded,” he snarled, not even bemoaning the loss of Lirain’s denuded bandeau, which Moonflower made vanish within a shawl-buried vaster one.

“Or,” she said, keeping him fixed by her gaze, “hung up.”

Lirain and her (uniformed?) confederate were tools then, Hanse reasoned, prowling the streets. Prince Kadakithis was nice to look at, and charismatic. So his imperial half-brother had sent him way out here, to Sanctuary. Now he wanted him sorely embarrassed here. Hanse could see the wisdom of that, and knew that despite what any might say, the Emperor was no fool. So, then. They two plotted. Lirain gained enough knowledge of Hanse to employ Cusharlain to investigate him. She had found a way to effect their meeting. Yes; though it hurt his ego, he admitted to himself that she had made the approach and the decisions. So now he was their tool. A tool of tools!

Robbing Kadakithis, however, had been his goal before he met that cupidinous concubine. So long as she helped, he was quite willing to let her think he was her dupe. He wanted to be their tool, then—insofar as it aided him to gain easy entry to the palace. Forewarned and all that. There was definitely potential here for a clever man, and Hanse deemed himself twice as clever as he was, which was considerable. Finally, being made the tool of plotting tools was far too demeaning for the Hansean ego to accept.

Yes. He would gain the wand. Trade it to the Prince-Governor for gold—no, better make it the less intimidating silver—and freedom. From Suma or Mrsevada or some place, he’d send a message back, anonymously informing Kadakithis that Lirain was a traitor. Hanse smiled at that pleasant thought. Perhaps he’d just go up to Ranke and tell the Emperor what a pair of incompetent agents he had down in Sanctuary. Hanse saw himself richly rewarded, an intimate of the Emperor...

And so he and Lirain met again, and made their agreement and plan.

A gate was indeed left open. A guard did indeed quit his post before a door of the palace. It did indeed prove to be unlatched. Hanse locked it after him. Thus a rather thick-waisted Shadowspawn gained entry to the palatial home of the governor of Sanctuary. Dark corridors led him to the appointed chamber. As the prince was not in it, it was not specifically guarded. The ivory rod, carved to resemble rough-barked wood, was indeed there. So, unexpectedly enjoying the royal couch in its owner’s absence, was Lirain’s sister concubine. She proved not to have been drugged. She woke and opened her mouth to yell. Hanse reduced

that to a squeak by punching her in the belly, which was shockingly convex and soft, considering her youth. He held a pillow over her face, sustaining a couple of scratches and a bruised shin. She became still. He made sure that she was limp but quite alive, and bound her with a gaiter off her own sandal. The other he pulled around so as to hold in place the silken garment he stuffed into her mouth, and tied behind her head. He removed the pendant from one ear. All in darkness. He hurried to wrap the rod of authority in the drape off a low table. Hitching up his tunic, he began drawing from around his waist the thirty feet of knotted rope he had deemed wise. Lirain had assured him that a sedative would be administered to the Hell Hounds' evening libation. Hanse had no way of knowing that to be the truth; that not only had one of those big burly five done the administering, he had drunk no less than the others. Bourne and company slept most soundly. The plan was that Hanse would leave the same way he had entered. Because he knew he was a tool and was suspicious unto caution, Hanse had decided to effect a different exit.

One end of the rope he secured to the table whose drape he'd stolen. The other he tossed out the window. Crosswise, the table would hold the rope without following him through the window.

It proved true. Hanse went out, and down. Slipping out westwards to wend his way among the brothels, he was aware of a number of scorpions scuttling up and down his back, tails poised. Evidently the bound occupant of His Highness's bed was not found. Dawn was still only a promise when Hanse reached his second-floor room in the Maze.

He was a long time wakeful. Admiring the symbol of Rankan authority, named for the god they claimed had given it them. Marvelling at its unimposing aspect. A twig-like wand not two feet long, of yellowing ivory. He had done it!

SHORTLY AFTER NOON next day, Hanse had a talk with babbly old Hakiem, who had lately done much babbling about what a fine fellow His handsome Highness was, and how he had even spoken with Hakiem, giving him two pieces of good silver as well! Today Hakiem listened to Hanse, and he swallowed often. What could he do save agree?

Carrying a pretty pendant off a woman's earring, Hakiem hied him to the palace. Gained the Presence by sending in one word to the Prince, with the pendant. Assured him he had nothing to do with the theft. Most privily Hakiem stated what he'd been told, and the thief's terms. Ransom.

The Prince-Governor had to pay, and knew it. If he could get the damned Savankh back, he'd never have to let out that it had been stolen in the first place. Taya, who had spent a night in his bed less comfortable than she had expected, had no notion what had been taken. Too, she seemed to believe his promise to stretch or excise various parts of her anatomy should she flap her mouth to anyone at all.

Meanwhile the concubine Lirain and Hell Hound Bourne were jubilant. Plotting. Grinning. Planning the Revelation that would destroy their employer. Indeed, they lost no time in dispatching a message to their other employers, back in Ranke. That was premature, unwise, and downright stupid.

Next came the coincidence, though it wasn't all that much one. Zalbar and Quag were sword-happy hotheads. Razkuli complained of fire in the gut and had the runs besides. That left only two Hell Hounds; whom else would the prince entrust with this mission? After a short testing conference, he chose Bourne to implement the transaction with the thief. Bourne's instructions were detailed and unequivocal: all was to be effected precisely as the thief, through Hakiem, had specified. Bourne would, of course, receive a nice bonus. He was made to understand that it was also to serve as a gag. Bourne agreed, promised, saluted, louted, departed.

Once the villa had commanded a fine view of the sea and naturally terraced landscape flowing a league along the coast to Sanctuary. Once a merchant had lived here with his family, a couple of concubines who counted themselves lucky, servants, and a small army or defence force. The merchant was wealthy. He was not liked and did not care that many did not care for the way he had achieved wealth and waxed richer. One day a pirate attack began. Two days later the gorge that marked the beginning of rough country disgorged barbarians. They also attacked. The merchant's small army proved too small. He and his armed force and servants and unlucky concubines and family were wiped out. The manse he had called Eaglenest was looted and burned. The pirates had not been pirates and the barbarians had not been barbarians—technically, at least: they were mercenaries. Thus, forty years ago, had some redistribution of wealth been achieved by that clandestine alliance of Sanctuarite nobles and merchants. Others had called Eaglenest 'Eaglebeak' then and still did, though now the tumbled ruins were occupied only by spiders, snakes, lizards, scorpions, and snails. As Eaglebeak was said to be haunted, it was avoided.

It was a fine plan for a night meeting and transfer of goods, and to Eaglebeak came Bourne, alone, on a good big prancing horse that swished its tail for the sheer joy and pride of it. The horse bore Bourne and a set of soft saddlebags, weighty and jingling.

Near the scrubby acacia specified, he drew rein and glanced about at a drear pile and scatter of building stones and their broken or crumbled pieces. His long cloak he doffed before he dismounted. Sliding off his horse, he stood clear while he unbuckled his big weapons belt. The belt, with sheathed sword and dagger, he hung on his saddle-horn. He removed the laden bags. Made them jingle. Laid them on the ground. Stepping clear of horse and ransom, he held his arms well out from his body while he turned, slowly.

He had shown the ransom and shown himself unarmed. Now a pebble flew from somewhere to whack a big chunk of granite and go skittering. At that signal, Bourne squatted and, on clear ground in the moonlight, emptied both saddlebags in a clinking, chiming, shimmering, glinting pile of silver coinage amid which gleamed a few gold disks. Laboriously and without happiness, Bourne clinked them all back into the pouches of soft leather, each the size of a nice cushion. He paced forward to lay them, clinking, atop a huge square stone against which leaned another. All as specified.

"Very good." The voice, male and young, came out of the shadows somewhere; no valley floor was so jumbled with stones as this once-courtyard of Eaglebeak. "Now get on your horse and ride back to Sanctuary."

“I will not. You have something for me.”

“Walk over to the acacia tree, then, and look towards Sanctuary.”

“I will walk over to the tree and watch the saddlebags, thanks, thief. If you show up without that rod...”

Bourne did that, and the shadows seemed to cough up a man, young and lean and darkly dressed. The crescent moon was behind him so that Bourne could not see his face. The fellow pounced lithely atop a stone, and held high the stolen Savankh.

“I see it.”

“Good. Walk back to your horse, then. I will put this down when I pick up the bags.”

Bourne hesitated, shrugged, and began ambling towards his horse. Hanse, thinking that he was very clever indeed and wanting all that money in his hands, dropped from his granite dais and hurried to the bags. Sliding his right arm through the connecting strap, he laid down the rod he carried in his left. That was when Bourne turned around and charged. While he demonstrated how fast a big burly man in mail-coat could move, he also showed what a dishonest rascal he was. Down his back, inside his mail-shirt, on a thong attached to the camel-hair torque he wore, was a sheath. As he charged, he drew a dagger long as his forearm.

His quarry saw that the weight of the silver combined with Bourne’s momentum made trying to run not only stupid, but suicidal. Still, he was young, and a thief: supple, clever, and fast. Bourne showed teeth, thinking this boy was frozen with shock and fear. Until Hanse moved, fast as the lizards scuttling among these great stones. The saddlebags slam-jingled into Bourne’s right arm, and the knife flew away while he was knocked half around. Hanse managed to hang on to his own balance; he bashed the Hell Hound in the back with his ransom. Bourne fell sprawling. Hanse ran—for Bourne’s horse. He knew Bourne could outrun him so long as he was laden with the bags, and he was not about to part with them. In a few bounds, he gained a great rock and from there pounced on to the horse’s back, just as he’d seen others do. It was Hanse’s first attempt to mount a horse. Inexperience and the weight of his ransom carried him right off the other side.

In odd silence, he rose, on the far side of the horse. Not cursing as anyone might expect. Here came Bourne, and his fist sprouted fifteen inches of sharp iron. Hanse drew Bourne’s other dagger from the sheath on the saddle and threw the small flat knife from his buckskin. Bourne went low and left, and the knife clattered among the stumbled stones of Eaglebeak. Bourne kept moving in, attacking under the horse. Hanse struck at him with his own dagger. To avoid losing his face, Bourne had to fall. Under the horse. Hanse failed to check his swipe, and his dagger nicked the inside of the horse’s left hind leg.

The animal squealed, bucked, kicked, tried to gallop. Ruins barred him, and he turned back just as Bourne rose. Hanse was moving away fast, hugging one saddlebag to him and half-dragging the other. Bourne and his horse ran into each other. One of them fell backwards and the other reared, neighed, pranced—and stood still, as if stricken with guilt. The other, downed painfully in mail for the second time in two minutes, cursed horse, Hanse, luck, gods, and himself. And began getting up.

However badly it had been handled, Bourne had horse, sword, and a few paces away, the rod of Rankan authority. Hanse had more silver than would comprise Bourne's retirement. Under its weight he could not hope to escape. He could drop it and run or be overtaken. Dragging sword from sheath, Bourne hoped the roach kept running. What fun to carve him for the next hour or so!

Hanse was working at a decision, too, but none of it fell out that way. Perhaps he should have done something about trying to buy off a god or two; perhaps he should have taken better note of the well, this afternoon, and not run that way tonight. He discovered it too late. He fell in.

He was far less aware of the fall than of utter disorientation—and of being banged in every part of his body, again and again, by the sides of the well, which were brick, and by the saddlebags. When his elbow struck the bricks, the bags were gone. Hanse didn't notice their splash; he was busy crashing into something that wasn't water. And he was hurting.

The well's old wooden platform of a cover and sawhorse affair had fallen down inside, or been so hurled by vandals or ghosts. They weren't afloat, those pieces of very old, damp wood; they were braced across the well, at a slant. Hanse hit, hurt, scrabbled, clung. His feet were in water, and his shins. The wood creaked. The well's former cover deflected the head-sized stone Bourne hurled down. The fist-sized one he next threw struck the well's wall, bounced to roll down Hanse's back, caught a moment at his belt, and dropped into the water. The delay in his hearing the splash led Bourne to misconstrue the well's depth. Hanse clung and dangled. The water was cold.

In the circle of dim light above, Hanse saw Bourne's helmeted head. Bourne, peering down into a well, saw nothing.

"If you happen to be alive, thief, keep the saddlebags! No one will ever find you or them—or the Savankh you stole! You treacherously tricked us all, you see, and fled with both ransom and Savankh. Doubtless I will be chastised severely by His pretty Highness—and once I'm in Ranke again, I'll be rewarded! You have been a fool and a tool, boy, because I've friends back home in Ranke who will be delighted by the way have brought embarrassment and shame on Prince Kittycat!"

Hanse, hurting and scared that the wood would yield, played dead. Strange how cold water could be, forty feet down in a brick-walled shaft!

Grinning, Bourne walked over and picked up the Savankh, which His stupid Highness would never see. He shoved it into his belt. Stuck his sword into the ground. And began wrestling a huge stone to drop, just in case, down the well. His horse whickered. Bourne, who had left his sword several feet away, froze. He straightened and turned to watch the approach of two helmeted men. They bore naked swords. One was a soldier. The other was—the Prince-Governor?!

"We thank you for letting us hear your confession. Bourne, traitor."

Bourne moved. He gained his sword. No slouch and no fool, he slashed the more dangerous enemy. For an instant the soldier's mail held Bourne's blade. Then the man crumpled. The blade came free and Bourne spun, just in time to catch the prince's slash in the side. Never burly, Kadakithis had learned that he had to put everything he had behind his practice strokes just so that his opponents would notice. He did that now, so wildly and viciously that his blade tore several links of Bourne's mail-coat and relocated them in his flesh. Bourne

made an awful noise. Horribly shocked and knowing he was hurt, he decided it were best to fly. He staggered as he ran, and the prince let him go.

Kadakithis picked up the fallen rod of authority and slapped it once against his leather-clad leg. His heart beat unconscionably rapidly as he knelt to help the trusted man he'd brought with him. That was not necessary. In falling, the poor wight had smashed his head open on a chunk of marble from a statue. Slain by a god. Kadakithis glanced after Bourne, who had vanished in darkness and the ruins.

The Prince-Governor stood thinking. At last he went to the well. He knelt and called down into blackness.

"I am Prince Kadakithis. I have the wand. Perhaps I speak uselessly to one dead or dying. Perhaps not, in which case you may remain there and die slowly, or be drawn up to die under torture, or... you can agree to help me in a little plan I have just devised. Well—speak up!"

No contemplation was required to convince Hanse that he would go along with anything that meant vacating the well and seeing his next birthday. Who'd have thought pretty Prince Kittycat would come out here, and helmeted, too! He wondered at the noises he had heard. And made reply. The wood creaked.

"You need promise only this," Kadakithis called down. "Be silent until you are under torture. Suffer a little, then tell all."

"Suffer? ... Torture?"

"Come, come, you deserve both. You'll suffer only a little of what you have coming. Don't, and betray these words, roach, and you will die out of hand. No, make that slowly. Nor will anyone believe you, anyhow."

Hanse knew that he was in over his head, both literally and figuratively. Hanging on to creaky old wood that was definitely rotting away by the second, he agreed.

"I'll need help," the prince called. "Hang on."

Hanse rolled his eyes and made an ugly face. He hung on. He waited. Daring not to pull himself up on to the wood. His shoulders burned. The water seemed to grow colder, and the cold rose up in his legs. He hung on. Sanctuary was only about a league away. He hoped Kitty—the prince—galloped. He hung on. Though the sun never came up and the moon's position changed only a little, Hanse was sure that a week or two passed. Cold, dark, and sore, those weeks. Riches! Wealth! Cudgel had told him that revenge was a stupid luxury the poor couldn't afford!

Then His clever Highness was back, with several men of the night watch and a lot of rope. While they hauled up a bedraggled, bruised Shadowspawn, the prince mentioned a call of nature and strolled away amid the clutter of big stones. He did not lift his tunic. He paused on the other side of a pile of rubble. He gazed earthwards, upon a dead traitor, and slowly he smiled in satisfaction. His first kill! Then Kadakithis began puking.

PITCHY TORCHES FLICKERED to create weird, dancing shadows on stone walls grim as death. The walls framed a large room strewn with tables, chains, needles, pincers, gyves, ropes, nails, shackles, hammers, wooden wedges and blocks and splinters, pliers, fascinating gags, mouth- and tongue-stretchers,

heating irons, wheels, two braziers, pulleys. Much of this charming paraphernalia was stained dark here and there. On one of the tables lay Hanse. He was bruised, cut, contused—and being stretched, all in no more than his breechclout. Also present, were Prince Kadakithis, his bright-eyed consort, two severe Hell Hounds, his oddly attired old adviser, and three Sanctuarite nobles from the council. And the palace smith. Massively constructed and black-nailed, he was an imposing substitute for the torturer, who was ill.

He took up a sledgehammer and regarded it thoughtfully. Milady Consort's eyes brightened still more. So did those of Zalbar the Hell Hound. Hanse discovered that in his present posture a gulp turned his Adam's apple into a blade that threatened to cut his throat from the inside.

The smith put down the hammer and took up a pair of long-handled pincers.

"Does he have to keep that there rag on his jewels, Yer Highness?"

"No need to torture him there," Kadakithis said equably. He glanced at his wife, who'd gone all trembly. "Yet. Try a few less horrific measures. First."

"Surely he isn't tall enough," Zalbar said hopefully. He stood about six inches from the crank of the rack on which Hanse lay, taut.

"Well do something to him!" Milady snapped.

The smith surprised everyone. The movement was swift and the crack loud. He drew back his whip from a white stripe across Hanse's stomach. It went pink, then darker, and began to rise. The smith raised his brows as if impressed with himself. Struck again, across the captive's chest. The whip cracked like a slack sail caught in a gust. Chains rattled and Hanse's eyes and mouth went wide. A new welt began to rise. The smith added one across the tops of his thighs. An inch from the jewels, that. Milady Consort breathed through a mouth gone open.

"I don't like whippin' a man," the smith said. "Nor thisun either. Think I'll just ease this arm out of its socket and turn it around t'other way."

"You needn't walk all the way around to this side," Zalbar rumbled. "I'll turn the crank."

To the considerable disappointment of Zalbar and Sanctuary's first lady, Hanse began to talk. He told them about Bourne and Lirain. He could not tell them of Bourne's death, as he did not know of it.

"The Prince Governor of Sanctuary," Kadakithis said, "and representative of the Emperor of Ranke, is merciful to one who tells him of a plot. Release him and hold him here—without torture. Give him wine and food."

"Damn!" Zalbar rumbled.

"Might I be getting back to my wife now. Highness? This job ain't no work for me, and I got all that anchor chain to work on tomorrow."

Hanse, not caring who released or guarded or fed him, watched the exit of the royal party.

With Zalbar and Quag, the prince went to Lirain's apartment. "Do you stay here," he said, and took Quag's sword. Neither Hell Hound cared for that and Zalbar said so.

"Zalbar: I don't know if you had a big brother you hated or what, you're a mean hothead who really ought to be employed as royal wasp-killer. Now stand here and shut up and wait for me."

Zalbar came to attention. He and Quag waited, board-stiff save for a rolling of dark eyes, while their charge entered the chamber of his treacherous concubine. And closed the door. Zalbar was sure that a week or two passed before the door opened and Kadakithis called them in. Quag's sword dripped in his hand.

The Hell Hounds hurried within and stopped short. Staring. Lirain lay not dead, but asleep, sprawled naked and degagee on a rumpled couch, obviously a recent participant in love-making. Naked beside her lay Bourne, not alive, and freshly bloodied.

"I've knocked her unconscious," the Prince said. "Take her down to the less comfortable bed so recently vacated by that Hanse fellow, who is to be sent to my apartment. Here, Quag—oh." The prince carefully wiped Quag's sword on Lirain's belly and thighs and handed it to his Hell Hound. Both guards, impressed and pleased, saluted. And bowed as well. They looked passing happy with their prince. Prince Kadakithis looked flagrantly happy with himself.

ATTIRED IN A soft tunic that proved a thief could be the size of a prince, Hanse sipped wine from a goblet he wished he could conceal and carry off with him. He rolled his eyes to glance around this royal chamber for audiences most private. For that reason the door was open. By it sat a deaf woman plucking a lute.

"Both of us are overdue for sleep, Hanse. The day presses on to mid-morning."

"I am... more accustomed to night work than y—than His Highness."

The prince laughed. "So you are, Shadowspawn! Amazing how many clever men turn to crime. Broke into the very palace! My very chamber! Enjoyed a royal concubine too, eh?" He sat gazing reflectively at the thief, very aware that they were nearly of an age. Peasant and prince; thief and governor. "Well, soon Lirain will be babbling her head off, and all will know there was a plot—and from home at that! Also that she was dishonouring her royal master's bed with her co-conspirator."

"And that His heroic Highness not only slew the son of a toad, but showed a true noble ruler's mercy by sparing a thief," Hanse said hopefully.

"Yes, Hanse. That is being put into writing at this moment. Ah, and there were witnesses to everything! All of it!"

Hanse was overboldened to say, "Except... Bourne's death, my lord prince."

"Hoho! Would you like to know about that, Hanse? You know so much already. We have holds each on the other, you and I. I killed Bourne up at Eaglenest. With one stroke," Kadakithis added. After all, it had been his first.

Hanse stared.

"You do seem to be learning caution, Shadowspawn! I do hope you will accept the employment I'll soon be offering you. You avoid mentioning that when you came out of that well you saw no corpse. No; he tried to flee and died a few feet away. The moment we returned here, I drugged Lirain. Drank it herself; thought she was drinking poison! She has lain with no one this night. I arranged her on the couch. One absolutely loyal man and I went back and fetched Bourne. My lady wife and I placed the corpse beside Lirain. Along with a bladder of the blood of a—appropriately!—pig. I thrust my sword into it before I called in Quag and Zalbar."

Hanse continued to stare. This saffron-haired boy was clever enough to be a thief! Hanse bet he was dissembling still, too; doubtless a favoured rug merchant had aided in the bringing of Bourne's corpse into the palace!

The prince saw his stare, read it. "Perhaps I'm not Prince Kitty-cat after all? I will shortly have high respect in Sanctuary, and wide knowledge of the plot is a weapon against my enemies at home. You are a hero—ah." The prince nodded towards the doorway, beckoned. An oldish man entered to hand him a sheet of parchment. It soon bore the governor's signature and seal. The secretary left. Kadakithis handed the document to Hanse with a small flourish and a smile that Hanse saw was distinctly royal. Hanse glanced at it—very impressive—and looked again at the prince.

"Oh," Kadakithis said, and no more; a prince did not apologize to a thief for forgetting his lack of education. "It says that by my hand and in the name of the Emperor in Ranke, you are forgiven of all you may have done up to this day, Hanse. You aren't a quintuple murderer, are you?"

"I've never killed anyone, Highness."

"I have! This very night—last night, rather!"

"Pardon, Highness, but killing's the business of them that rule, not thieves."

Kadakithis looked long and thoughtfully at Hanse after that, and would likely quote Shadowspawn long hence. Hanse had twice to mention the ransom at the bottom of the well.

"Ah! Forgot that, didn't I. It's been a bit busy tonight—last night. I've things to do. Hanse. A busy day ahead on no sleep and much excitement. I fear I can't be bothered thinking about some coins someone may have lost down an old well. If you can get it out, do. And do return here to discuss employment with me."

Hanse rose. He felt the kinship between them and was not comfortable with it. "That... will need some... some thinking, Prince-Governor, sir. I mean... work. And for you! Uh, yourself, that is—Your Highness. First I have to try to get used to the fact that I can't hate you any more."

"Well, Hanse, maybe you can help a few others not to. I could use the help. Unless you take it ill of me to remind you that half of salvage found in this demesne is the property of the government."

Hanse began to wonder about the possibility of transferring the few gold coins into one saddlebag. If he was able to get the bags out of the well. That would take time, and help. And that would require paying someone. Or cutting someone in...

Hanse left the palace wearing a soft new tunic, eyes narrowed. Planning, calculating. Plotting.

