

# **The Making of Thieves' World**

## **Thieves' World, #1**

**by Robert Lynn Asprin, 1946-2008**

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IT WAS A dark and stormy night...

Actually, that Thursday night before Boskone '78 was a very pleasant night. Lynn Abbey, Gordy Dickson, and I were enjoying a quiet dinner in the Boston Sheraton's Mermaid Restaurant prior to the chaos which inevitably surrounds a major science fiction convention.

As so often happens when several authors gather socially, the conversation turned to the subject of writing in general and specifically to problems encountered and pet peeves. Not to be outdone by my dinner companions, I voiced one of my long-standing gripes: that whenever one set out to write heroic fantasy,

it was first necessary to reinvent the universe from scratch regardless of what had gone before. Despite the carefully crafted Hyborean world of Howard or even the delightfully complex town of Lankhmar which Leiber created, every author was expected to beat his head against the writing table and devise a world of his own. Imagine, I proposed, if our favourite sword-and-sorcery characters shared the same settings and time-frames. Imagine the story potentials. Imagine the tie-ins. What if...

What if Fafhrd and Mouser had just finished a successful heist. With an angry crowd on their heels, they pull one of their notorious doubleback escapes and elude the pursuing throng. Now suppose this angry, torch-waving pack runs headlong into Conan, hot and tired from the trail, his dead horse a day's walk behind him. All he wants is a jug of wine and a wench. Instead, he's confronted with a lynch mob. What if his saddlebags are full of loot from one of his own ventures, yet undiscovered?

Or what if Kane and Elric took jobs marshalling opposite armies in the same war?

Why, I proclaimed, the possibilities are endless. Pouring a little more wine, I admitted that one of my pet projects under consideration was to do a collection of fantasy stories featuring not one, but an array of central characters. They would all share the same terrain and be peripherally aware of each other's existence as their paths crossed. The only problem: my writing schedule was filling up so fast I wasn't sure when or if I'd ever get a chance to write it.

More wine flowed.

Gordy sympathized eloquently, pointing out that this was a problem all writers encountered as they grew more and more successful. Time! Time to fulfil your commitments and still be able to write the fun things you really want to write. As an example, he pointed out that there were countless story potentials in his Dorsai universe, but that he was barely able to find the time to complete the Childe Cycle novels, much less pursue all the spin-offs.

More wine flowed.

The ideal thing, Lynn suggested, was to be able to franchise one's ideas and worlds out to other authors. The danger there, Gordy pointed out, was the danger of losing control. None of us were particularly wild about letting any Tom, Dick, or Harry play around with our pet ideas.

More wine flowed.

Anthologies! If we went to an anthology format, we could invite authors to participate, as well as having final say as to the acceptability of the stories submitted.

Gordy ordered a bottle of champagne.

Of course, he observed, you'll be able to get some top-flight authors for this because it'll be fun. They'll do it more for the love of the idea than for the money.

I remarked on the ease with which *our* idea had become *my* anthology. As the weight of the project had suddenly come to rest on my shoulders, I asked whether he intended to assist or at least contribute to the anthology. His reply set the classic pattern for nearly all the contributors to *Thieves' World*: I'd love to, but I don't have the time. It's a lovely idea, though.

(Five minutes later) I just thought of a character who would fit into this perfectly.

(Fifteen minutes later... thoughtful stare into nothingness converting into a smug grin) I've got my story!

During this last exchange, Lynn was saying very little. Unbeknownst to me, she had mentally dealt herself out of the project when Gordy proposed *established writers only*. At that point in time, she had in her suitcase the manuscript for *Daughter of the Bright Moon*, hoping to find an interested editor at Boskone. She was far from being *established*. It is to her credit, however, that she successfully hid her disappointment at being excluded, and accompanied Gordy and me as we finished the last of the champagne and went *trolling for editors*.

It may seem to you that it was rather early to try to find a publisher for such a nebulous work. That's how it struck me at the time. Gordy pointed out, however, that if we could find an editor and nudge him into an appraisal of the dollar value of the idea, I would have a better feel for what my budget would be when I went to line up my authors. (The fact that this made sense to me at the time will serve as an indication of the lateness of the hour and the amount of wine we had consumed.)

To this end, we devised a subtle tactic. We would try to find an author and an editor in the same room preferably in the same conversation. We would then pitch the idea to the author as a potential contributor and see if the editor showed interest.

We found such a duo and launched into our song and dance. The editor yawned, but the author thought it was a great idea. Of course, he didn't have the time to write anything... Then he thought of a character! That's how John Brunner came on board.

The next morning, the effects of our dinner wine dissipated and I began to realize what I had let myself in for. A brand-new author, barely published, and I was going to try to edit an anthology? Soliciting contributions from the best in the field, yet! That revelation sobered me up faster than a bucket of ice water and a five-day hotel bill.

Still, the ball was already rolling, and I had story commitments from Gordy and John. I might as well see how far things could go.

FRIDAY: I ambushed Joe Haldeman over a glass of lunch. He thought it was a terrific idea, but he didn't have any time. Besides, he pointed out, he had never written heroic fantasy. I countered by reminding him of his stay in Vietnam, courtesy of the US Army. Surely, I pressed, there must be one or two characters he had encountered who would fit into a sword-and-sorcery setting with minimal rewriting. His eyes cleared. He had his character.

SATURDAY: I finally found out what was bothering Lynn and assured her of a place on the Thieves' World roster. I was confident she would be *established* before the anthology came-out, and even if she wasn't, I knew she could produce a solid story. No, I don't have a crystal ball. Lynn and I both live in Ann Arbor and share workspace when we're writing. As such, I had been reading the manuscript of *Daughter of the Bright Moon* as she was writing it, and knew her writing style even before the editors saw it. (My prophecy proved correct. Ace/Sunridge bought her

manuscript, and a major promo campaign is currently underway. The book should be on the stands when you see this anthology.)

SUNDAY: Wonder of wonders. Over cognac at the Ace dead-dog party, Jim Baen expresses a solid interest in the anthology... if I succeed in filling the remaining slots with authors of an equal quality to those already committed. Leaving the party, I encounter Jim Odbert in the hall and do a little bragging. He brings me down to earth by asking about the street map. I hadn't even thought about it, but he was right! It would be absolutely necessary for internal continuity. Thinking fast, I commission him on the spot and retire, harbouring a nagging hunch that this project might be a bit more involved than I had imagined.

Back in Ann Arbor, I face the task of filling the remaining openings for the anthology. My magic wand for this feat is a telephone. Having been a fan for many years, I have had passing contact with several prominent authors, many of whom don't know that I'm writing now. I figure it will be easier to jog their memories over the phone than trying to do the same thing by letter.

The problem now is... who? Solid authors... that's a must. Authors who know me well enough that they won't hang up when I call. Authors who don't know me so well that they'll hang up when I call.

Andy! Andy Offutt. Our paths had crossed several times at cons, and I know we share a mutual admiration of Genghis Khan.

Andy doesn't have any time, but is super enthusiastic over the idea and has his character. Yes, that's all one sentence. If anything, I've condensed it. If you've ever talked to Andy on the phone, you'll understand.

Next will be Poul Anderson. Poul and I know each other mostly by reputation through Gordy and through a medieval re-enactment organization known as the Society for Creative Anachronism, Inc. Sir Bela of Eastmarch and Yang the Nauseating. Hooboy, do we know each other. In spite of that, Poul agrees to do a story for me... if he gets the time... in fact, he has a character in mind.

The list is growing. Confident now that the impressive array of authors submitting stories will offset my own relative obscurity, I go for a few who may not remember me.

Roger Zelazny was Pro Guest of Honour at a convention in Little Rock, Arkansas, where I was Fan Guest of Honour. He remembers and listens to my pitch.

I spoke briefly with Marion Zimmer Bradley about the sword-work in *Hunter of the Red Moon*—when we passed in the hall at a Wester-Con in Los Angeles—two years ago. She remembers me and listens to my pitch.

Philip José Farmer and I have seen each other twice: once in Milwaukee and once in Minneapolis. Both times we were at opposite ends of a table with half a dozen people crowded between us. He acknowledges the memory, then listens in silence for fifteen minutes while I do my spiel. When I finally grind to a halt, he says okay and hangs up. I find out later that this is his way of expressing enthusiasm. If he hadn't been enthusiastic, he would have said no and hung up.

By this time it's Minicon. Jim Odbert passes me a set of maps. Then he, Gordy, Joe, Lynn, and I sit around half the night discussing the history of the city and the surrounding continent. A set of house rules is devised and agreed upon: (1) Each contributor is to send me a brief description of the main character of his/her

story. (2) These descriptions will be copied and distributed to the other contributors. (3) Any author can use these characters in his/her story, providing they're not killed off or noticeably reformed.

I run all this through a typewriter and mail it out to all the contributors. It occurs to me that this isn't nearly as difficult as I had feared. My only worry is that the mails might slow communication with John Brunner in England, causing him to be late with his submission. Except for that everything was going fine.

Then the fun began...

Andy, Poul, and John all send me notes in varying degrees of gentleness correcting my grammar and/or word usage in the flier. They are willing to accept without confirmation that my spelling was intended as a joke. These are the people I'm supposed to be editing! Riiiiight!

Poul sends me a copy of his essay, „On Thud and Blunder”, to ensure the realism of the setting, particularly the economic structure of the town. He also wants to know about the judicial system in Sanctuary.

Andy wants to know about the deities worshipped, preferably broken down by nationality and economic class of worshippers. Fortunately, he includes a proposed set of gods, which I gleefully copy and send to the other contributors. He heads his ten-page letters with „To Colossus: The Asprin Project”. It occurs to me that with his own insight as an anthology editor, this could be more truth than humour.

To make my job a little easier, some of the authors start playing poker with their character sketches: “I won't show you mine till you show me yours.” They delay submitting their sketches until they see what the other authors turn in. One of these is Gordy. Remember him? He's the one who got me into this in the first place. He's the one who *had his character* before there was an anthology! Terrific!

John Brunner submits his story—a full year before the stated deadline. So much for transatlantic delays. I haven't gotten all the character descriptions yet. More important, I haven't gotten the advance money yet! His agent begins to prod gently for payment.

Roger reappraises his time commitments and withdraws from the project. Oh, well. You can't win them all.

Poul wants to know about the architectural style of Sanctuary.

Andy and Poul want to know about the structure and nationality of names.

A call comes in from Ace. Jim Baen wants the manuscript a full three months ahead of the contracted deadline. I point out that this is impossible—the new deadline would give me only two weeks between receiving the stories from the authors and submitting the complete manuscript to New York. If I encountered difficulties with any of the stories or if any of the submissions came in late, it would disrupt the schedule completely. They point out that if I can meet the new schedule, they'll make it their lead book for the month it's released. The avaricious side of me is screaming, but I stick to my guns and repeat that it's impossible to guarantee. They offer a contract for a second Thieves' World anthology, suggesting that if a couple of stories are late, I can include them in the next book. Under attack now both from my publisher and my own greedy nature, I roll my eyes heavenward, swallow hard, and agree.

A new note is rapidly dispatched to the contributors, politely reminding them of the approaching deadline. Also included is Gordy's character sketch for Jamie the Red which he had finally submitted under mild duress (his arm will heal eventually).

Andy calls and wants to know the prince's name. I haven't given it any thought, but am willing to negotiate. An hour later, I hang up. It occurs to me that I haven't written my story yet.

Gordy notifies me that he can't get his story done in time for the first book. Terrific! With Gordy and Roger both out of the first volume, it's starting to look a little short.

Andy's story comes in, as does Joe's and Poul's.

Andy's story includes a discussion with Joe's One-Thumb character. Joe has killed One-Thumb off in his story. A minor sequencing problem.

Poul's story has Cappen Varra going off on an adventure with Gordy's Jamie the Red. Gordy's Jamie the Red story won't be in the first book! A major sequencing problem! Oh, well. I owe Gordy one for talking me into editing this monster.

I look at the stories already in the bin and decide that the first draft of my story needs some drastic rewriting.

A note arrives from Phil Farmer. He had sent me a letter months ago, which apparently never arrived, withdrawing from the project. (It hadn't!) Realizing that withdrawing at this late date would leave me in a bad spot, he is now rearranging his writing schedule in order to send me *something*. Of course, it will be a little late. I am grateful, but panicky.

Lynn finishes her story and starts to gloat. I threaten to beat her head in with my Selectric.

Ace calls again. They want additional information for the cover copy. They also want a word count. I explain the situation as calmly as I can. Halfway through my explanation, the phone melts.

Ma Bell fixes my phone in record time (I am rapidly becoming their favourite customer), and I hurriedly call Marion to ask for a rough word-count on her unsubmitted story. She tells me she sent me a letter which must not have arrived. (It didn't.) She tells me she'll have to withdraw from the project because of time pressures in her other writing commitments. She tells me to stop gibbering and say something. I calm myself and explain I'd really like to have a story from her. I explain I really need her story. I mention that her character is on the cover of the book. She observes that the water gushing from the phone is threatening to flood her living room and agrees to try to squeeze the story into her writing schedule... before she flies to London in two weeks.

With steady hand but trembling mind, I call Ace and ask for Jim Baen. I explain the situation: I have six stories in hand (yes, I finally finished mine) and two more on the way... a little late... maybe. He informs me that with just six stories the book will be too short. He wants at least one more story and an essay from me about how much fun it was to edit the anthology. To calm my hysterics, he suggests I commission a back-up story in case the two en route don't arrive in time. I point out that there are only two weeks remaining before the deadline. He concedes that with such a limited time-frame, I probably won't be able to get a

story from a *name* author. He'll let me work with an *unknown*, but the story had better be good!

Christine DeWees is a kindly, white-haired grandmother who rides a Harley and wants to be a writer. Lynn and I have been criticizing her efforts for some time and have repeatedly encouraged her to submit something to an editor. So far, she has resisted our proddings, insisting that she would be embarrassed to show her work to a professional editor. I decide to kill two birds with one stone.

In my most disarming *nothing can go wrong* tones, I give my spiel to Christine and pass her a Thieves' World package. Three hours later, my phone rings. Christine loves the character of Myrtis, the madam of the Aphrodisia House and is ready to do a story centring around her. I stammer politely and point out that Myrtis is one of Marion's characters and that she might object to someone else writing her characters. Christine cackles and tells me she's already cleared it with Marion (Don't ask me how she got the phone number!), and everything is effervescent. Two days later, she hands me the story, and I still haven't gotten around to looking up effervescent in the dictionary.

With seven stories now in hand, I declare Thieves' World I to be complete and begin writing my *fun fun* essay. The stories from Marion and Phil can wait until the second book.

Then Marion's story arrives.

Marion's story interfaces so nicely with Christine's that I decide to use them both in the first book. Rather than cut one of the other stories, the volume is assembled with intros, maps, eight stories, and essay, crated, and shipped off to New York.

End of volume one! Print it!

The whole whirlwind process of editing this monster child was only vaguely as I had imagined it would be. Still, in hindsight, I loved it. With all the worries and panics, the skyhigh phone bills and the higher bar bills, I loved every minute. I find myself actually looking forward to the next volume... and that's what worries me!

## **Introduction**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **The Emperor**

„BUT SURELY YOUR Excellency can't dispute the facts of the matter!”

The robed figure of the Emperor never slackened its pacing as the new leader of the Rankan Empire shook his head in violent disagreement.

„I do not dispute the facts, Kilite,” he argued, „But neither will I order the death of my brother.”

„Stepbrother,” his chief adviser corrected pointedly.

„The blood of our father flows in both our veins,” the Emperor countered, „and I’ll have no hand in spilling it.”

„But Your Excellency,” Kilite pleaded, „Prince Kadakithis is young and idealistic...”

„... and I am not,” the Emperor finished. „You belabour the obvious, Kilite. That idealism is my protection. He would no more lead a rebellion against the Emperor—against his brother—than... I would order his assassination.”

„It is not the Prince we fear. Your Excellency, it’s those who would use him.” The adviser was adamant. „If one of his many false-faced followers succeeded in convincing him that your rule was unjust or inhumane, that idealism would compel him to move against you even though he loves you dearly.”

The Emperor’s pacing slowed until finally he was standing motionless, his shoulders drooping slightly.

„You’re right, Kilite. All my advisers are right.” There was weary resignation in his voice. „Something must be done to remove my brother from the hotbed of intrigue here at the capital. If at all possible, however, I would hold any thoughts of assassination as a last resort.”

„If Your Excellency has an alternative plan he wishes to suggest, I would be honoured to give it my appraisal,” Kilite offered, wisely hiding his feelings of triumph.

„I have no immediate plan,” the Emperor admitted. „Nor will I be able to give it my full concentration until another matter is settled which weighs heavily on my mind. Surely the empire is safe from my brother for a few more days?”

„What is the other decision demanding your attention?” the adviser asked, ignoring his ruler’s attempt at levity. „If it is something I might assist you in resolving...”

„It is nothing. A minor decision, but an unpleasant one nonetheless. I must appoint a new military governor for Sanctuary.”

„Sanctuary?” Kilite frowned.

„A small town at the southern tip of the empire. I had a bit of trouble finding it myself—it’s been excluded from the more recent maps. Whatever reason there was for the town’s existence has apparently passed. It is withering and dying, a refuge for petty criminals and down-at-the-heels adventurers. Still, it’s part of the empire.”

„And they need a new military governor,” Kilite murmured softly.

„The old one’s retiring.” The Emperor shrugged. „Which leaves me with a problem. As a garrisoned empire town, they are entitled to a governor of some stature—someone who knows the empire well enough to serve as their representative and go-between with the capital. He should be strong enough to uphold and enforce the law—a function I fear where the old governor was noticeably lax.”

Without realizing it, he began to pace again.

„My problem is that such a man could be better utilized elsewhere in the empire. It seems a shame to waste someone on such an insignificant, out-of-the-way assignment.”



„Don't say *out-of-the-way*, Your Excellency," Kilite smiled. „*Say far from the hotbed of intrigue.*"

The Emperor looked at his adviser for a long moment. Then both men began to laugh.

## Chapter 2

### The Town

HAKIEM THE STORYTELLER licked the dust from his lips as he squinted at the morning sun. It was going to be hot again today—a wine day, if he could afford wine. The little luxuries, like wine, that he allowed himself were harder to come by as the caravans became fewer and more infrequent.

His fingers idly seeking a sand-flea which had successfully found its way inside his rags, he settled himself wearily in his new roost at the edge of the bazaar. Previously, he had frequented the large wharf until the fishermen drove him off, accusing him of stealing. Him! With all the thieves that abound in this town, they chose him for their accusations.

„Hakiem!"

He looked about him and saw a band of six urchins descending on him, their eyes bright and eager.

„Good morning, children," he grimaced, exposing his yellow teeth. „What do you wish of old Hakiem?"

„Tell us a story," they chorused, surging around him.

„Be off with you, sand-fleas!" he moaned, waving an arm. „The sun will be hot today. I'll not add to the dryness of my throat telling you stories for free."

„Please, Hakiem?" one whined.

„We'll fetch you water," promised another.

„I have money."

The last offer caught at Hakiem's attention like a magnet. His eyes fastened hungrily on the copper coin extended in a grubby hand. That coin and four of its brothers would buy him a bottle of wine.

Where the boy had gotten it mattered not—he had probably stolen it. What concerned Hakiem was how to transfer the wealth from the boy to himself. He considered taking it by force, but decided against it. The bazaar was rapidly filling with people, and open bullying of children would doubtless draw repercussions. Besides, the nimble urchins could outrun him with ease. He would just have to earn it honestly. Disgusting, the depths to which he had sunk.

„Very well, Ran-tu," he smiled extending his hand. „Give me the money, and you shall have any story you wish."

„After I hear the story," the boy announced haughtily. „You shall have the coin... if I feel the story is worth it. It is the custom."

„So it is." Hakiem forced a smile. „Come, sit here beside me so you can hear every detail."

The boy did as he was told, blissfully unaware that he was placing himself within Hakiem's long, quick reach.

„Now then, Ran-tu, what story do you wish to hear?”

„Tell us about the history of our city,” the boy chirped, forgetting his pretended sophistication for the moment.

Hakiem grimaced, but the other boys jumped and clapped their hands with enthusiasm. Unlike Hakiem, they never tired of hearing this tale.

„Very well,” Hakiem sighed. „Make room here!”...

He shoved roughly at the forest of small legs before him, clearing a small space in the ground which he swept smooth with his hand. With quick, practised strokes, he outlined the southern part of the continent and formed the north-south mountain range.

„The story begins here, in what once was the kingdom of Ilsig, east of the Queen's Mountains.”

„...which the Rankans call the World's End Mountains...” supplied an urchin.

„...and the Mountain Men call Gunderpah...” contributed another.

Hakiem leaned back on his haunches and scratched absently.

„Perhaps,” he said, the young gentlemen would like to tell the story while Hakiem listens.”

„No they wouldn't,” insisted Ran-tu. „Shut up, everyone. It's my story! Let Hakiem tell it.”

Hakiem waited until silence was restored, then nodded loftily to Ran-tu and continued.

„Afraid of invasion from the then young Rankan Empire across the mountains, they formed an alliance with the Mountain Tribes to guard the only known pass through the mountains.”

He paused to draw a line on his map indicating the pass.

„Lo, it came to pass that their fears were realized. The Rankans turned their armies towards Ilsig, and they were forced to send their own troops into the pass to aid the Mountain Men in the kingdom's defence.”

He looked up hopefully and extended a palm as a merchant paused to listen, but the man shook his head and moved on.

„While the armies were gone,” he continued, scowling, „there was an uprising of slaves in Ilsig. Body-servants, galley slaves, gladiators—all united in an effort to throw off the shackles of bondage. Alas...”

He paused and threw up his hands dramatically.

„...the armies of Ilsig returned early from their mountain campaign and put a swift end to the uprising. The survivors fled south... here... along the coast.”

He indicated the route with his fingers.

„The kingdom waited for a while, expecting the errant slaves to return of their own volition. When they didn't, a troop of cavalry was sent to overtake them and bring them back. They overtook the slaves here, forcing them back into the mountains, and a mighty battle ensued. The slaves were triumphant, and the cavalry was destroyed.”

He indicated a point in the southern portion of the mountain range.

„Aren't you going to tell about the battle?” Ran-tu interrupted.

„That is a story in itself... requiring separate payment,” Hakiem smiled.

The boy bit his lip and said nothing more.

„In the course of their battle with the cavalry, the slaves discovered a pass through the mountains, allowing them to enter this green valley where game was plentiful and crops sprang from the ground. They called it Sanctuary.”

„The valley isn't green,” an urchin interrupted pointedly.

„That's because the slaves were dumb and overworked the land,” countered another.

„My dad used to be a farmer, and he didn't overwork the land!” argued a third.

„Then how is it you had to move into town when the sands took your farm?” countered the second.

„I want to hear my story!” barked Ran-tu, suddenly towering above them.

The group subsided into silence.

„The young gentleman there has the facts of the matter right,” smiled Hakiem, pointing a finger at the second urchin. „But it took time. Oh my, yes, lots of time. As the slaves exhausted the land to the north, they moved south, until they reached the point where the town stands today. Here they met a group of native fishermen, and between fishing and farming managed to survive in peace and tranquility.”

„That didn't last long,” snorted Ran-tu, momentarily forgetting himself.

„No,” agreed Hakiem. „The gods did not will it so. Rumours of a discovery of gold and silver reached the kingdom of Ilsig and brought intruders into our tranquility. First adventurers, and finally a fleet from the kingdom itself to capture the town and again bring it under the kingdom's control. The only fly in the kingdom's victory wine that day was that most of the fishing fleet was out when they arrived, and, realizing the fate of the town, took refuge on Scavengers' Island to form the nucleus of the Cape Pirates, who harass ships to this day.”

A fisherman's wife passed by and, glancing down, recognized the map in the dust, smiled, and tossed two copper coins to Hakiem. He caught them neatly, elbowing an urchin who tried to intercept them, and secreted them in his sash.

„Blessings on your house, mistress,” he called after his benefactor.

„What about the empire?” Ran-tu prompted, afraid of losing his story.

„What? Oh, yes. It seems that one of the adventurers pushed north seeking the mythical gold, found a pass through the Civa, and eventually joined the Rankan Empire. Later, his grandson, now a general in the empire, found his ancestor's journals. He led a force south over his grandfather's old route and recaptured the town. Using it as a base, he launched a naval attack around the cape and finally captured the kingdom of Ilsig, making it a part of the empire for ever.”

„Which is where we are today,” one of the urchins spat bitterly.

„Not quite,” corrected Hakiem, his impatience to be done with the story yielding to his integrity as a tale-spinner. „Though the kingdom surrendered, for some reason the Mountain Men continued to resist the empire's attempts to use the Great Pass. That was when the caravan routes were established.”

A faraway look came into his eyes.

„Those were the days of Sanctuary's greatness. Three or four caravans a week laden with treasures and trade goods. Not the miserable supply caravans you see today—great caravans that took half a day just to enter town.”

„What happened?” asked one of the awestruck urchins.

Hakiem's eyes grew dark. He spat in the dust.

„Twenty years ago, the empire succeeded in putting down the Mountain Men. With the GreatPass open, there was no reason to risk major caravans in the bandit-ridden sands of the desert. Sanctuary has become a mockery of its past glory, a refuge for the scum who have nowhere else to go. Mark my words, one day the thieves will outnumber the honest citizenry, and then...”

„One side, old man!”

A sandalled foot came down on the map, obliterating its outlines and scattering the urchins.

Hakiem cowered before the shadow of one of the Hell Hounds, the five new elite guards who had accompanied the new governor into town.

„Zalbar! Stop that!”

The unsmiling giant froze at the sound of the voice and turned to face the golden-haired youth who strode on to the scene.

„We're supposed to be governing these people, not bludgeoning them into submission.”

It seemed strange, seeing a lad in his late teens chastizing a scarred veteran of many campaigns, but the larger man merely dropped his eyes in discomfort.

„Apologies, Your Highness, but the Emperor said we were to bring law and order to this hell-hole, and it's the only language these blackguards understand.”

„The Emperor—my brother—put me in command of this town to govern it as I see fit, and my orders are that the people are to be treated kindly as long as they do not break the laws.”

„Yes, Your Highness.”

The youth turned to Hakiem.

„I hope we did not disturb your story. Here—perhaps this will make up for our intrusion.”

He pressed a gold coin into Hakiem's hand.

„Gold!” Hakiem sneered. „Do you think one miserable coin can make up for scaring those precious children?”

„What?” roared the Hell Hound. „Those gutter-rats? Take the Prince's money and be thankful I—”

„Zalbar!”

„But Your Highness, this man is only playing on your—”

„If he is, it's mine to give...”

He pressed a few more coins into Hakiem's outstretched hand.

„Now come along. I want to see the bazaar.”

Hakiem bowed low, ignoring the Hell Hound's black glare. When he straightened, the urchins were clustered about him again.

„Was that the Prince?”

„My dad says he's the best thing for this town.”

„My dad says he's too young to do a good job.”

„Izzat so!”

„The Emperor sent him here to get him out of the way.”

„Sez who?”

„Sez my brother! He's been bribing guards here all his life and never had any trouble till the Prince came. Him and his whores and his Hell Hounds.”

„They’re going to change everything. Ask Hakiem... Hakiem?”

The urchins turned to their chosen mentor, but Hakiem had long since departed with his new wealth for the cool depths of a tavern.

## Chapter 3

### The Plan

„AS YOU ALREADY know, you five men have been chosen to remain with me here in Sanctuary after the balance of the honour guard returns to the capital.”

Prince Kadakithis paused to look each man in the face before he continued. Zalbar, Bourne, Quag, Razkuli, and Arman. Each of them a seasoned veteran, they doubtless knew their work better than the Prince knew his. Kadakithis’s royal upbringing came to his rescue, helping him to hide his nervousness as he met their gazes steadily.

„As soon as the ceremonies are completed tomorrow, I will be swamped with problems in clearing up the backlog of cases in the civil court. Realizing that, I thought it best to give you our briefing and assignments now, so that you will be able to proceed without the delay of waiting for specific instructions.”

He beckoned the men forward, and they gathered around the map of Sanctuary hung on the wall.

„Zalbar and I have done some preliminary scouting of the town. Though this briefing should familiarize you with the basic lay of the land, you should each do your own exploring and report any new observations to each other. Zalbar?”

The tallest of the soldiers stepped forward and swept his hand across the map.

„The thieves of Sanctuary drift with wind like the garbage they are,” he began.

„Zalbar!” the Prince admonished. „Just give the report without asides or opinions.”

„Yes, Your Highness.” The man replied bowing his head slightly. „But there is a pattern here which follows the winds from the east.”

„The property values change because of the smells,” Kadakithis reported. „You can say that without referring to the people as garbage. They are still citizens of the empire.”

Zalbar nodded and turned to the map once more.

„The areas of least crime are here, along the eastern edge of town,” he announced, gesturing. „These are the richest mansions, inns, and temples, which have their own defences and safeguards. West of them, the town consists predominantly of craftsmen and skilled workers. The crime in this area rarely exceeds petty theft.”

The man paused to glance at the prince before continuing.

„Once you cross the Processional, however, things get steadily worse. The merchants vie with each other as to who will carry the widest selection of stolen or illicit goods. Much of their merchandise is supplied by smugglers who openly use the wharves to unload their ships. What is not purchased by the merchants is sold directly at the bazaar.”

Zalbar's expression hardened noticeably as he indicated the next area.

„Here is a tangle of streets known simply as the Maze. It is acknowledged by all to be the roughest section of town. Murder and armed robbery are commonplace occurrences day or night in the Maze, and most honest citizens are afraid to set foot there without an armed escort. It has been brought to our attention that none of the guardsmen in the local garrison will enter this area, though whether this is out of fear or if they have been bribed...”

The prince cleared his throat noisily. Zalbar grimaced and moved on to another area.

„Outside the walls to the north of town is a cluster of brothels and gaming houses. There are few crimes reported in this area, though we believe this is due more to a reluctance on the part of the inhabitants to deal with authorities than from any lack of criminal activity. To the far west of town is a shantytown inhabited by beggars and derelicts known as the Downwinders. Of all the citizens we've encountered so far, they seem the most harmless.”

His report complete, Zalbar returned to his place with the others as the prince addressed them once again.

„Your priorities until new orders are issued will be as follows,” he announced, eyeing the men carefully. „First, you are to make a concentrated effort to reduce or eliminate petty crime on the east side of town. Second, you will close the wharves to the smuggler traffic. When that is done, I will sign into law certain regulations enabling you to move against the brothels. By that time, my court duties should have eased to a point where we can formulate a specific plan of action for dealing with the Maze. Any questions?”

„Are you anticipating any problems with the local priesthood over the ordered construction of new temples to Savankala, Sabellia, and Vashanka?” Bourne asked.

„Yes, I am,” the prince acknowledged. „But the difficulties will probably be more diplomatic than criminal in nature. As such, I will attend to it personally, leaving you free to pursue your given assignments.”

There were no further questions, and the prince steeled himself for his final pronouncement.

„As to how you are to conduct yourselves while carrying out your orders...” Kadakithis paused dramatically while sweeping the assemblage with a hard glare. „I know you men are all soldiers and used to meeting opposition with bared steel. You are certainly permitted to fight to defend yourselves if attacked or to defend any citizen of this town. However, I will not tolerate brutality or needless bloodshed in the name of the empire. Whatever your personal feelings may be, you are not to draw a sword on any citizen unless they have proven—I repeat, proven—themselves to be criminal. The townsfolk have already taken to calling you Hell Hounds. Be sure that title refers only to the vigour with which you pursue your duties and not to your viciousness. That is all.”

There were mutters and dark glances as the men filed out of the room. While the Hell Hounds' loyalty to the empire was above question, Kadakithis had cause to wonder if in their own minds they truly considered him a representative of that empire.

