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Into a Dark Realm : Darkwar Book 2

Raymond E. Feist

Chapter One

Hunt

A woman screamed in outrage.

Three young men overturned carts and pushed aside shoppers as they crashed through the evening market. Their leader – a tall, rawboned youth with red hair – pointed to the retreating back of their prey and shouted, 'There he goes!'

Night approached the port city of Durbin as desperate men raced through the streets. Merchants pulled prized wares from tables as three young warriors shoved anyone and anything blocking their pursuit. In their wake they left consternation, curses, and threats they ignored.

The summer heat of the Jal-Pur desert still clung to the walls and cobbles of the city, despite the slight breeze off the sea. Even the harbor gulls were content to stand idyll by and watch for any morsel that might fall from a passing vendor's cart. The more ambitious among them would launch themselves into the air and soar for a moment or two, hanging languidly on the heat rising from the dock stones, then quickly return to stand quietly near their brethren.

The evening markets were crowded, for most of the inhabitants of Durbin had spent the blistering afternoon resting in the shade. The city's pace was leisurely, for these were the hottest days of summer, and men who lived on the desert's edge knew better than to struggle needlessly against the elements. Things were as the gods' willed.

So the sight of three armed and apparently dangerous young men pursuing another, while hardly a remarkable experience in Durbin, was unexpected given the season and the time of day. It was just too hot to be running.

The man attempting to flee was, from his look, a desertman, swarthy and dressed in a baggy shirt and loose fitting pantaloons, a midnight blue headdress and open robe, his feet clad in low topped boots. Those behind were led by a northerner, probably

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from the Free Cities or the Kingdom of the Isles. His ginger hair was uncommon in the Empire of Great Kesh.

His companions were also young men, one broad-shouldered and dark of hair, the other blond and of slighter built, but with hard expressions that added years to their appearance. Sunburned and dirty, their attentions were fixed on their quarry and their weapons were easily at hand. They were dressed in garb that marked them as men from the Vale of Dreams – breeches, linen shirts, riding boots, leather vests instead of robes and sandals – most likely mercenaries, a point driven home by the grim determination revealed in their youthful faces.

They reached a boulevard that led to the docks, and the man fleeing dodged between merchants, shoppers, and dockmen heading home for the night. The leader of those in pursuit paused but an instant and said, 'He's heading for the grain shippers dock.' With a hand gesture he sent his blond haired companion up a side street, them motioned for the darker haired youth to come with him.

'I hope you're right,' said the shorter man. 'I'm getting tired of all this running.'

With a quick glance that showed a grin, the leader said, 'Too much time sitting in ale houses, Zane. We need to get you back to the Island and Tillingbrook's tender mercies.'

Too out of breath to comment, the shorter youth just made a sound that clearly indicated he found that remark utterly lacking in humor, as he quickly wiped perspiration from his brow. He just hurried to keep up with his taller companion.

The inhabitants of Durbin were practiced when it came to dealing with duels, brawling, gang wars, riots, and all other manner of civil disorder. By the time Jommy and Zane reached the corner around which they had seen their quarry vanish, the alarm had outstripped them, and the street leading to the docks was almost deserted. Passers by, merchants, and seaman bound for nearby inns and taverns had sensed coming trouble and vanished into whatever scant cover they could manage. Doors closed, shutters slammed, and those that couldn't get inside did their best to find shelter.

As Jommy Killaroo kept his eyes on the tiny figure of their fleeing target, Zane conDoin glanced into every passed doorway, alley entrance, or other cover for potential ambush. All he saw were citizens of Durbin literally hunkering down, waiting for the trouble to pass.

Jommy saw the man they chased duck around a corner at the end of the boulevard, and said, 'Right towards Tad if he's as fast as he usually is!'

Zane said, 'He is. Suri won't escape.'

For a month Jommy, Tad, and Zane had been on the trail of this man, a erstwhile trader named Aziz Suri, a desertman from the Jal-Pur who was reputedly an importer of spices and oils from the Free Cities. He was also reputed to be a freelance

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spy, broker in information, trader in secrets, and a close contact of the Nighthawks, the Guild of Death. One month earlier, at the Emperor of Kesh's Midsummer's Festival, a plot to destabilize the Empire and plunge it into civil war had been prevented by agents of the Conclave of Shadows, and now they were seeking out the remaining pockets of assassins, to finally put an end to their centuries' long reign of terror.

Zane struggled to keep up with Jommy; while able to run as far as the taller youth, he was not able to do so at his longer legged friend's furious pace, and maybe Jommy was been right; too many nights in the ale house and not enough exercise. His trousers had been getting tighter of late.

As they reached the end of the street, they came upon the grain shippers docks, a long series of stone works, punctuated by three large derricks, fronting on two massive warehouses. From the far end of the dock Tad ran towards them, shouting, 'In there!' and motioning that their quarry had ducked into the narrow passage between the two warehouses.

Jommy and the two younger boys took no pains to hide their approach, for after a month in Durbin, they knew this area of the city fairly well; knew their prey had dashed into a dead-end alleyway. When they reached the narrow opening, the man bolted from it, heading straight towards the harbor. The setting sun glinted red off the sea, and he squinted and turned his head, raising his hands to shield his eyes.

Jommy reached out and got just enough of a grip on the man's arm for a second to turn him completely around. He flailed his arms, tipping off-balance, as he vainly sought to keep his feet under him. Jommy reached out again, trying to get a grip on the man's tunic, but only proceeded in causing him to stumble farther. Before anyone could get a grip on any part of the slender trader, he slammed into the center most derrick.

Stunned for an instant, the desertman turned, teetered, and then as he regained his wits, he stepped off the edge of the pier.

A cry akin to a dog whose paw had just been stepped on filled the air as he vanished over the edge. The three young men hurried to the edge and looked over. Dangling from the derrick rope just above a loose cargo net was the little trader, hurling invectives upward as he glanced down at the rocks below the jetty. The tide was out, so only a few inches of water protected the dangling man from serious injury below. All the shallow draft barges used to ferry grain to the ships in the harbor were anchored out in deeper water. 'Pull me up!' he shouted.

Jommy said, 'Why should we, Aziz? You led us a nasty chase through the entire city of Durbin in this bleedin' heat' – he wiped perspiration off his forehead and flipped it with is hand at the man to demonstrated just how out of sorts he was – 'and all we wished for was a short, quiet chat.'

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Tad said, ‘Murderous cutthroats? I think he has us confused with someone else.’

Zane pulled out his belt knife and said to Aziz, ‘You're confusing us with a different bunch of murderous cutthroats is my brother's opinion. I'm not so sure. Looking at his companions, he asked, ‘If I cut this rope what do you think of his chances?’

Tad leaned over, as if studying the matter, then said, ‘It's no more than twenty feet to the rocks. I say it's better than even money he only breaks a leg or an arm or two.’

Jommy said, ‘Depends on how he falls. Now, I've seen a bloke pitch backwards off a ladder once, only the bottom rung, mind you, and he smacked his head against the dirt and broke his skull. Took him a bit of time to die, then, but he was dead, in the end, and dead is dead.’

‘I could cut it and we could see,’ suggested Zane.

‘No!’ shouted the trader.

‘Well, the evening tide's coming in,’ said Tad to the trader. ‘If you hang there for another couple of hours, you should be able to just let go and swim over to those steps up the side of that far dock.’ He pointed across the harbor.

‘If the harbor sharks don't get him,’ said Jommy to Zane.

‘I can't swim,’ shouted the trader.

‘Not a lot of opportunities to learn in the desert, I expect,’ observed Zane.

‘Then you're into it up to your neck, aren't you, mate?’ asked Jommy. ‘What say you we trade a bit? You answer a question, and if I like the answer, we pull you up.’

‘If you don't like the answer?’

‘He cuts the rope,’ said Jommy, pointing to Zane. ‘And we'll see if the fall kills you, or just ruins your life – whatever's left of it before the tide comes in and drowns you, of course.’

‘Barbarian!’

Jommy grinned. ‘Been called that more than a few times since I got to Kesh.’

‘What do you wish to know?’ asked the desertman.

‘One thing only,’ said Jommy, losing his grin. ‘Where's Jomo Ketlami?’

‘I don't know!’ shouted the man as he tried to gain purchase for his feet in the dangling cargo net.

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'We know he's somewhere in the city,' shouted Jommy. 'We know he hasn't gotten out of the city. And we know that you have been doing business with him for years. Here's the deal: you tell us where he is, we pull you up. Then we go find him, get what we want to know from him, and kill him. You've got no worries.

'Or you don't tell us and we leave you hanging. You might climb up to the top of this derrick, and get down from there somehow, but even if you do, we'll just start spreading the word you sold out Ketlami. So, we'll just keep an eye on you, wait until he kills you, and we'll have him, anyway.' Jommy's grin returned. 'You're choice, mate.'

'I can't!' cried the terrified trader.

'Five Imperial Silvers he doesn't die when he hits the rocks,' said Tad.

'I don't know,' Zane replied. 'Seems like that's a bit better than even money.'

'What say you to my five against your four?'

Zane nodded enthusiastically. 'Done!'

'Wait!'

Jommy said, 'Yes?'

'Don't cut the rope, please. I have children to care for!'

'Liar,' said Zane. 'It's well known you tell the girls at the bordellos you're without a wife.'

'I didn't say I had a wife,' admitted the little man. 'But I do care for a handful of bastards I've sired.'

'You are the soul of generosity, mate,' observed Jommy.

'There are men who do far less for their git,' replied the dangling trader. 'I have even taken the eldest into my house to learn a craft!'

'Which?' asked Zane. 'Trading, spying, lying, or cheating at cards?'

'You know,' asked Tad, 'that as we stand here jibber-jabbing, the tide's coming in?'

'So?' Jommy looked at his friend with a narrowing gaze.

'Well, if we don't cut the rope soon, then the chances are he'll just drown, and that means the bet's off.'

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'Can't have that,' said Zane, as he flourished the large hunting knife he was holding, twirled it like an expert, and began sawing at the heavy rope that ran up through the block and tackle below the topmost pulley of the derrick.

'No!' shouted the panic-stricken little man. 'I'll talk!'

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'What say you to my five against your four?'

Zane nodded enthusiastically. 'Done!'

'Wait!'

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'Liar,' said Zane. 'It's well known you tell the girls at the bordellos you're without a wife.'

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Before Aziz could think to flee again, Jommy had his sword point at the man's throat. 'Now, you were going to tell us the whereabouts of Jomo Ketlami.'

With eyes downcast, Aziz said, 'You must find him and kill him quickly, and those who serve him, for if any of those . . . murderers linger, my life is over.'

'That's our plan,' said Jommy. 'Now, where is he?'

'You were mistaken about him still being in the city. He has more ways through the walls than a sewer rat. There are caves a half-day's ride to the southwest, in the hills, and there he has gone to ground.'

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'And you know this how?' asked Tad.

'He sent word, before he fled. He has need of me. Without me, he has no way to send messages to his confederates in other cities on the Bitter Sea. I am to find my way to those caves in two nights, for he has messages he must send to his murderous brothers.'

'I think we should just kill him,' said Zane. 'He's in a lot deeper than we thought.'

'No,' said Jommy, putting up his sword as Tad gripped Aziz by the shoulder. 'I think we're going to take him back to the inn and have him sit down with your dad, and we'll let him decide this.' To the trader, Jommy said, 'It's all the same to me if you live or die, so if I were in your place, I'd put some effort in convincing us it's better for everyone involved if you stay alive.'

The man nodded.

'Come along,' said Jommy. 'If you're lying to us, your bastards will have to learn to fend for themselves.'

'On their heads, I will tell you only the truth.'

'No,' said Jommy. 'It's on your head, Aziz.'

As the sun vanished below the western horizon, the four men moved away form the docks, into the pest hole of a city that was Durbin.

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