

Mothership

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Extract

CHAPTER ONE

'Jad, you're an idiot,' Lord Krader told me.

'Thank you, sire. You know how much I always appreciate your invaluable criticism—'

'Shut up, you fawning cretin, and let me finish. You're an idiot, yes, but my son is an even bigger idiot. You, however, are also shrewd, devious, cunning and a born liar. You're a natural survivor. Hopefully, you'll keep my son alive while saving your own skin. That's why you're going with him on his hair-brained expedition.'

This was not good news. On the contrary, it was extremely bad news.

'I am? But Lord Krader, surely you jest!' I said, profoundly alarmed.

'I never jest,' he growled. 'Rumour has it that *you're* the court jester around here.' As usual, he wielded his heavy sarcasm as if it were a battle-axe.

But I persevered. 'I can't go, sire. I'm needed here. Who would keep your court entertained in my absence?'

'You know as well as I do that you're a lousy jester, Jad. We can all do without your bad jokes, abysmal juggling and clumsy pratfalls for a few months. In fact, it would be a distinct relief.'

That hurt. It might have been true, but that didn't mean I liked hearing it in such blunt terms. But then, Lord Krader had never particularly cared for me, even before I became his jester. For a warlord he was unusually fair-minded: a decent type of tyrant as tyrants go, I had to admit. I had many reasons to be grateful to him, but even as a child I'd inevitably managed to rub him up the wrong way. And I'd always found

him an intimidating figure, both emotionally and physically. He was a barrel-chested man with massive arms; his imposing head was made larger by his thick grey hair and luxuriant beard. When he grinned, he seemed to have more teeth than any normal person. No one liked it when he grinned, particularly me.

'But my Lord, I wouldn't be of any use as an escort to the Prince,' I tried again. 'He needs the protection of an expert soldier. Captain Vilkter, for example. He'd be ideal!'

'Captain Vilkter is a good soldier, I agree. One of my best men. But he's also a bloodthirsty maniac. He'd be picking fights the whole time. He'd get himself killed, and my son along with him. No, you're the best choice for this assignment. You're an out and out coward.'

This catalogue of my character faults was being issued in Lord Krader's grisly trophy room, the walls of which were studded with the glassy-eyed heads of his hunting victims: bears, deer and various other unfortunate beasts. As far as Lord Krader was concerned, my faults were numerous, and so far he was only skimming the surface. I tried another approach. 'Sire, you know I'm a terrible rider. Horses and I just don't get along. To be honest, horses hate me.'

Lord Krader was seated in a high-backed, throne-like chair. I was seated on a small stool so that he could look down on me. He leaned forward, gave me a malicious smile and said, 'They've probably seen your act.'

I forced a laugh. 'Very good, sire. I must remember that one. But seriously, if I ride for any length of time I get nauseous.'

'The practice will do you good. By the time you return you'll be an expert horseman.'

He had said the key word: 'return'. There was no guarantee that we *would* return, of course, but I decided not to voice that grim possibility. After all, Prince Kender was his only son. I tried to think of yet another objection, but while I was doing so my gaze fell on the head of a ferocious-looking griffin mounted on the wall. It seemed to be looking directly at me, its

silent message being: 'If this happened to *me* it sure as hell can happen to you too.'

Lord Krader said, 'My mind is made up. No more arguing. Now go and select a suitable horse. Preferably one that doesn't bite you on first sight.'

'Yes, my Lord,' I said miserably. I stood up and turned to go.

'Oh, and Jad—'

I stopped and turned to face him again. 'Yes, my Lord?'

'Don't come back alone.' And he grinned.

I got the message. He wasn't talking about the horse.

I left the trophy room in a mood that was equal parts pique and gloom. I was piqued partly because of what Lord Krader had said about my jestering abilities – but in fairness, I had to admit I was probably the worst court jester in all of Urba. My every appearance at Lord Krader's court induced groans and a number of shouted obscenities, most of them coming from Lord Krader himself. The fact that I hadn't even wanted to be his bloody jester didn't make me feel any better. But I'd much prefer continuing to try and make a fool of myself at court than to go off with Ken on a suicide mission.

I blamed the Day of Wonder. Nothing had been the same since the Day. Not that we in Capelia knew on the actual Day that the Day of Wonder was even taking place. The only out-of-the-ordinary thing that happened to us on the Day was that the magic light globes – a rare gift from the Elite – suddenly stopped working, plunging the entire castle into darkness. As a result, the town's candle and torch makers were doing great business, but the castle remained dim and gloomy no matter how many candles and torches were installed. It was some five weeks before news reached us of the wondrous and world-shattering events that had taken place on the Day, and the days that followed.

And now, thanks to the Day of Wonder, Ken had gone stark, raving mad.

As I wandered disconsolately through the now very badly lit castle, it struck me how quickly one's life can turn to shit. I'd

woken up this morning, as usual, next to Tiri, one of the kitchen maids, without a care in the world. Well, with hardly a care in the world.

And now suddenly I was doomed. I began to feel angry. I decided to go in search of Ken rather than go and audition horses, as Lord Krader had ordered. Perhaps I could talk Ken out of his mad enterprise, I thought, though it was a somewhat futile hope. I was horribly afraid that Lord Krader was being overly optimistic in his belief that I would somehow keep his son alive. It was only a matter of luck that Ken hadn't managed to get us both killed by now – he was forever coming up with reckless schemes, even when we were children. There was the time when we were both twelve and he decided to launch a two-man raid on Vurgun, our biggest neighbour and traditional enemy – the raiding party consisted of himself and me. Of course we were quickly captured and Lord Krader had to pay Lord Vorgal, Vurgun's warlord, a hefty ransom for the return of his only son. It was touch and go whether I would be included in the package; fortunately I was, as a kind of afterthought. Then Ken had decided we should see how far we could up climb up the Wall. I was lucky to suffer only a broken leg that time – not by attempting to climb the Wall myself, but by breaking Ken's fall when he landed on top of me. Ken survived unscathed . . .

I checked my watch by the light of a flickering torch. It was close to eleven p.m. and I knew where he was likely to be. The archery range was currently the Prince's favourite haunt. He'd developed a new type of crossbow, capable of firing three bolts in rapid succession, and he delighted in testing his invention at every opportunity. While I had discovered a talent for conjuring in my late teenage years, Ken found he had a natural flair for engineering, though he applied this ability almost exclusively to weaponry. He'd come up with the idea for the three-in-one crossbow some time ago, but it was only since the demise of the Elite that he'd been able to build a working model. The Elite had had strict rules about how far we low-lifers were allowed to develop anything, and these rules were

ruthlessly implemented. I shuddered as I recalled the fate of one of Lord Krader's wise men, a member of his council of advisors, a few years ago. He'd prised from a ceiling one of the magic light globes, and the metal box it was attached to; he'd intended to take it apart to try and discover how it worked. His attempts to open the box all failed, but even so a group of Elite turned up at the castle the following day, arrested him and took him away. He never returned.

Before I went in search of Ken, I made a swift detour downstairs to the kitchen. As usual it was stifling hot in there. I found Tiri plucking a large goose. Tiri was a fair-headed, well-upholstered girl who verged on being pretty.

'Tiri, I've got something important to tell you—' I began, and then I paused. The goose was twitching. 'Tiri, that bird's still *alive*.'

'No it's not,' she said as she continued her energetic plucking. Her face and bare, muscular arms were covered in sweat.

'But it's still moving!'

'I've only just wrung its neck. It's just nerves.'

'Nerves? No wonder it's feeling nervous. It's not dead and you're plucking it!'

'It's dead.'

'If you insist,' I said, feeling squeamish. 'Anyway, listen, I've got something important to tell you.'

'Jad, can't you see I'm busy?' she said irritably. 'Tell me later.'

'But it really is important!'

'I'm sure it is. You've finally learnt to juggle more than two balls at once?'

Stung, I said sulkily, 'It's even far more important than that.'

'Whatever it is, tell me tonight. Now go away, Jad, do. You're distracting me.'

Deeply offended, I searched for a sarcastic retort, then, failing to find a suitable response I turned and flounced haughtily out of the kitchen. As I left, it occurred to me that I had a lot in common with that hapless bird: my goose was

going to be well and truly cooked too unless I could talk some sense into Prince Ken.

As expected, I found him on the archery range in the grounds at the rear of the castle. Also as expected, he was playing with his new toy. As I arrived he fired off three rounds, then shouted for the distant manservant to move the target even further away. He beamed at me as he cranked the crossbow back to full tautness.

'Look, Jad, look how quickly one can reset this beauty! The winding action on the windlass is so smooth a girl could do it!'

We are both twenty-three years old, but apart from being the same height, there all resemblances between us end. Ken is an exceedingly handsome young man, with a fine physique and a mane of thick black hair. He exudes vitality and good health and is so charismatic it's downright sickening. Not surprisingly, women can't resist him. I won't say I don't resent and envy him, because I do. I, on the other hand, may be just as tall, but I'm a thin, gangling figure with a long face and a ridiculous mop of red hair. It's an ironic joke on the part of the gods that I certainly *look* like a court jester . . .

'Ken, we have to talk,' I told him seriously.

He frowned. 'So talk away.'

'Your father has insisted that I go with you on your spying expedition.'

'Marvellous!' Ken grinned at me. 'I hoped he would. I had a word in his ear. We're going to have a fine old time, Jad.' He took aim and fired another three bolts, barely giving the servant time to clear the target area. 'Damn. They fell short!' he cried in disgust. 'Still, a range of over a hundred yards is pretty impressive, wouldn't you say?'

'Indeed it is. I'm truly thrilled for you. Look, Ken, won't you reconsider this entire plan of yours? It's too bloody dangerous. You could get killed. More importantly, you could get *me* killed. Leave it to the professionals.'

He gave me one of his newly minted aristocratic looks. He'd clearly been practising in the mirror. 'I *am* a professional, Jad.'

'You know what I mean. Your father has sent out his spies

already. There's no need for you to risk your life as well. To risk *our* lives.'

'I'm going to try and increase the tension,' he said, ignoring my last plea. He rewound the crossbow, took three more bolts from his ammunition belt and reloaded.

'Well, you've already increased *my* tension,' I told him, crossly.

He ignored my comment and said, 'My father's spies are all men of little imagination. I, on the other hand, will be able to establish the big picture. This isn't some minor skirmish between a few domains – the entire world is being affected by what has happened to the Elite. It's vital my father receives reliable information about any potential dangers that might arise.'

I had to admit this was true, though I was surprised to hear Ken put it so well. I assumed, rather unkindly, that he must have been present at a recent meeting between his father and his council of advisors.

'For example,' he continued, 'those timber merchants from Lexos who arrived last week said the warlord Camarra is busy launching a major campaign of conquest. He's moving his forces towards the Citadel; apparently he plans to eventually conquer all of Urba. We need to know if there's any truth in these rumours. And there are accounts of massed dragon attacks on domains at the other end of the world—' He fired the crossbow again. The servant threw himself on the ground, but again the bolts fell just short of the target. 'Damn,' Ken muttered.

'There hasn't been enough time since the Day of Wonder for any real information from the other end of the world to reach us,' I pointed out.

'I know, I know,' he said, irritably. 'The dragon story was probably just that – a story – but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try and learn as much as possible about what's going on.'

I tried a different approach, adopting a serious tone. 'Look, Ken—'

He held up a warning hand. 'You know I don't want you to call me that any longer. Especially when we're not alone.'

I looked around. 'But we *are* alone.'

He pointed at the distant manservant hovering by the target, no doubt dreading another fusillade. 'What about him?'

I sighed. 'Yes, your highness. Forgive me, sire.'

He laughed and clapped me on the back. 'Swallow your misgivings about our journey. We're going to have a grand adventure, I promise you!'

'I don't *want* a grand adventure,' I protested, 'I want to continue with my boring life right here.'

'Oh Jad, surely you'd like a break from people constantly sneering at your attempts to be a court jester? It has to be very depressing for you.'

'It's a challenge,' I said with a sniff. 'One of these days I'll make someone laugh. Apart from your mother.'

'People never stop laughing at you.'

'You know what I mean. I want the right *kind* of laughter.'

'When we return from our mission you'll get respect, not laughter.'

'I don't need any respect, your most royal of highnesses. And besides, you persist in this optimistic belief that we're going to return from this exercise; it's utter folly. It's dangerous out there – far more dangerous than it used to be. I've heard the rumours too: there have been rebellions in several domains. Your royal credentials may offer you – us – no protection at all if the normal diplomatic customs have broken down along with law and order.'

'Aha!' he said, triumphantly. 'You wrongly assume that I will be travelling as Prince Kender!'

'You'll be travelling as *Princess* Kender?'

He gave me a contemptuous glare. 'I'm going to disguise myself as a commoner. You are now looking at Gideron Blaze, mercenary soldier. A cynical, hard-bitten, freelance swordsman. No scruples, and capable of doing anything if the price is right.'

I stared at him. I wondered what illustrated adventure story

he'd taken this character from. I'd long given up reading such juvenile fictions, but Ken still devoured them avidly.

'Yes, I see the likeness. Good choice of character. But who will I be? Black Basil, the notorious pirate?'

'Of course not. You don't need a disguise – you're already a commoner. You can be yourself.'

'Oh, thank you, your highness. So I'm a wandering jester, am I? A kind of freelance jokester?'

He thought it over. 'I don't see why not. You'll be like a wandering minstrel, except you tell jokes round the campfire for money rather than play an instrument. Except—' He broke off and gave me an apologetic look. 'Perhaps you shouldn't actually try to *tell* any jokes. Otherwise you'll destroy your credibility.'

I bristled at his slur. 'You want me to be a wandering jester who doesn't tell jokes? That doesn't seem very credible.'

'Jad, you're *not* credible as a court jester. You'll be staying in character.'

I kept sulkily silent.

'Just stick to doing magic tricks,' he continued, 'you're good at them.'

'You're too kind. So please tell me why a hard-bitten mercenary is travelling in the company of a non-joke-telling jester, such as myself, who can perform magic tricks? What do I do – distract your opponents with my famous disappearing egg routine before you hack them to pieces?'

The Prince waved a hand dismissively. 'We'll think of something.'

'Glad to hear it. When do you plan to begin this momentous expedition?'

'Tomorrow. First thing in the morning.'

'That soon?'

'Is that a problem?'

'I suppose not,' I admitted. 'It's not as if I have a lot of affairs to settle before we leave.' Actually, Tiri was the only thing I had to settle before I left. No doubt when I finally got to break the news of my departure and imminent death to her

there would be tears aplenty; I intended spending the night consoling her. Actually, I thought I'd prefer it if she spent the night consoling *me*.

'Don't pack much,' Ken told me, 'we'll be travelling light. And we can pick up supplies and anything else we need from the garrison at the Vurgun border.'

'Fine. I'll probably just bring a pen, ink and some paper. Just in case I have to write my will in a hurry.'

Ken gave me another hearty clap on the back. He does that a lot. It's bloody annoying. 'Cheer up, Jad, one day you'll thank me for giving you this marvellous opportunity.'

'When that day arrives I don't know which one of us will be the more surprised,' I muttered, cursing him under my breath. Don't get me wrong: I love Ken like a brother. That's not surprising as we were raised together more or less as brothers. I was only two years old when my parents were killed by a band of Vurgun raiders; after that Lord Krader more or less adopted me. Well, it was really the idea of his kindly wife, Lady Kalina. But, like most people, she did have an ulterior motive: she wasn't able to have any more children after Ken, and she thought I would make a substitute brother and playmate: Ken was also two at the time I was orphaned. So I grew up in the castle with Ken, believing myself to be part of the royal family for several years, until the day I was taken aside by Lord Krader and told, in his customary blunt way, the reality of my situation. I was nine at the time. From then on I slept in the stables with the stable boys – and the bloody horses – though during the day I continued to be Ken's companion, with my usual free access to all the royal parts of the castle. I suppose it was a strange childhood, but it could have been a lot worse. However, when I reached the age of eighteen, Lord Krader decreed that it was time I took up a trade. My choices were limited: I could join the army or become a lumberjack.

Trees. Capelia has a lot of trees. This is due to its location: it lies next to one of the two great Walls of the Gods that bookend Urba like, well . . . bookends. The giant red jewels that lie at the centre of each vast, blue Wall are the sources of

the sun that, during the day, stretches the entire length of the world, all eight thousand miles of it. As children, we learned that the gods had created the Walls at the same time that they'd created Urba, out of the solid rock that constitutes much of the entire Universe. Capelia's close proximity to the Wall was the reason it was cold the whole year round. Apart from the great jewel of the sun, the Wall had a circular series of huge holes, each several miles in diameter. From these holes torrents of cold air would periodically issue forth, and as a result of this cold climate, so the theory went, Capelia, like many areas that border the Wall, was thickly covered with trees. We have trees coming out of our arses. Stand anywhere in the domain and all you can see is what appears to be an endless forest curving upwards on either side of you. Capelia's unique type of high-quality timber is the domain's national asset, and its chief source of revenue. Well, its *only* source of revenue, really, so the profession of lumberjack is a pretty common one.

However, being a lumberjack involves a lot of scrambling up trees to lop off branches, and I have no head for heights. I also have no liking for falling long distances to the ground, which lumberjacks tend to do a lot. As for joining the army – again, I lack the necessary qualifications: namely, the complete lack of any ability when it comes to using any type of weapon. I am unable to engage anyone in a fencing match without closing my eyes, a distinct disadvantage. And the one time I tried to use a crossbow, Lord Krader almost declared a state of national emergency.

Again it was Lady Kalina, my substitute mother in a distant sort of way, who came up with a solution to the problem: she suggested I should be apprenticed to the court jester, who went under the stage name of Harius the Hilarious. Lord Krader, after a lot of pressure, I'm sure, from his wife, grudgingly agreed and so suddenly I had a new profession. I wasn't exactly thrilled by the idea, but it beat the hell out of falling from the top of a tree, or getting skewered by a sword or crossbow quarrel. And it also meant I got to move out of the

stables and into one of Harius's small rooms at the top of the crumbling Green Tower. Harius had been the jester for years; Lord Krader had actually inherited him from his own father. He was a skilled performer in many ways: an expert juggler, he had an impressive range of conjuring tricks, did great impressions (his Lord Krader was a killer) and he could tumble in the most spectacular fashion. But not only was he getting very old, he also had a drinking problem. A very serious drinking problem.

I soon realised this once I became his apprentice. In theory, he was supposed to be passing on his skills to me, but this usually consisted of him handing me, say, a book called *Juggling Made Easy* before he headed off in the direction of the wine cellars. As a result, my skills as a jester didn't perceptibly improve during the whole year I was Harius's apprentice. As a juggler, I hadn't even advanced beyond being able to handle one ball or club at a time. And when Harius told me, as he frequently did, that I was coming along 'brilliantly', I took his compliments with a pinch of salt: it was pretty obvious his critical assessment was more than slightly coloured by his wine consumption.

Despite the all-round lack of tutoring, I did manage to become an accomplished conjurer: I had discovered my natural aptitude for sleight-of-hand. But this and a talent for picking locks that I used in my much-underrated escapology routine did not leave me massively overqualified as an all-round jester.

This wouldn't have mattered if Harius had managed to continue as the court jester, but, sadly for me, that wasn't the case: the inevitable happened one night, during a banquet being held in honour of some visiting – and very important – timber merchants. Harius had that day imbibed a particularly large proportion of the contents of one of the wine cellars; that night, when he made his usual entrance at the top of the main staircase, he did a spectacular tumble down the stairs. On this occasion, his tumble was *very* spectacular, a tumble of breathtaking dimensions. He ended up in a heap in front of Lord Krader's table, raised his head to issue a triumphant 'Ta-

dahhh! and promptly died – though no one realised this until the applause had finished, when Harius didn't leap up to take his usual bow.

At least Harius went out on a high note; it also meant I abruptly inherited his mantle as court jester, a position for which I was far from ready. I've successfully blanked out all memory of my debut performance, though I'm certain it didn't involve any tumbles down the main staircase. I do remember that at the end of my act Lady Kalina clapped enthusiastically. She was quite alone in this.

I sighed, and turned my attention from our childhood back to the matter at hand. Ken was signalling to the manservant to collect the bolts he'd fired; the man's relief was obvious even from this distance.

'Finished with your practice?'

'For now,' Ken replied. 'I'm going to the Compound.'

'Again? You must know every inch of that place by now.'

'Well, I find it fascinating. Don't you?'

'It gives me the creeps. When I'm in there, I keep expecting the Elite to return at any moment.'

'No chance of that. Anyway, come with me.'

'Do I have to?'

'Yes. There's more I want to discuss with you about our journey.'

'Oh, good,' I muttered as the servant, panting alarmingly, finally reached us. Ken gave him the crossbow and told him to return it to his workshop, adding a warning that the man's life depended on the weapon reaching the armoury workshop undamaged.

Then we set off for the Compound together.