The Swords of Night and Day

David Gemmell

Chapter One

First there was darkness, complete and absolute. No sounds to disconcert him, no conscious thoughts to concern him. Then came awareness of darkness and everything changed. He felt a pressure against his back and legs, and a gentle thudding in his chest. Fear touched him.

Why am I in the dark? In that instant a bright, powerful image filled his mind.

A man snarling with hatred, leaping at him, spear raised. The face disappearing in a spray of crimson as a sword blade half severed the skull. More warriors attacking him. There was no escape.

His body jerked spasmodically, his eyes flaring open. There were no painted warriors, no screaming enemies yearning for his death. Instead he found himself lying in a soft bed and staring up at an ornate ceiling, high and domed. He blinked and took a deep breath, his lungs filling with air. The sensation was exquisite - and somehow unnatural.

Confused, the man sat up and rubbed at his eyes. Sunshine was streaming through a high, arched opening to his right. It was so bright and painful that he raised his arm to shield his eyes from the brilliance. Then he saw the dark blue tattoo upon his forearm. It was of a spider, and both ugly and threatening. His eyes adjusting to the brightness, he stood and padded naked across the room. A cool breeze rippled against his skin, causing him to shiver. This too, in its own way, was confusing. The feeling of cold was almost alien.

The opening led to a semicircular balcony high above a walled garden. Beyond the garden lay a town, nestling in a mountain valley, the buildings white, with red-tiled roofs. He gazed at the snow-capped peaks beyond the town, and the brilliant blue sky above them. Slowly he scanned the rugged landscape. There was nothing here that tugged at his memory. It was all new.

He shivered again, and walked back into the domed room. There were rugs upon the floor, some embroidered with flowers, others with angular emblems he did not recognize. The room itself was also unfamiliar. On a table nearby he saw a water jug and a long-stemmed crystal goblet. He reached for the jug. As he did so he caught sight of his reflection in a curved mirror on the wall behind the table. Cold, sapphire blue eyes stared back at him, from a face both stern and forbidding. There was something about the reflected man that was unrelentingly savage. His gaze travelled down to the tattoo of a snarling panther upon the chest.

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He knew then that a third tattoo was upon his back, an eagle with flaring wings. Though why these violent images were etched upon his body he had no idea at all.

Becoming aware of a gnawing emptiness in his stomach, he recognized - as if from ancient memory - the symptoms of hunger. Filling the crystal goblet with water he drank deeply, then looked around the room. On another narrow table, alongside the door, he saw a shallow bowl, filled with dried fruit, slices of honey-dipped apricot, and figs. Carrying the bowl back to the bed he sat down and slowly ate the fruit, expecting at any moment that memories would come flooding back.

But they did not.

Fear flared in him, but he quelled it savagely. 'You are not a man given to panic,' he said, aloud.

How would you know? The thought was unsettling.

'Stay calm and think,' he said.

The snarling faces came again. Hostile warriors all around him, hacking and slashing. He fought them with two deadly, razor sharp blades. The enemy fell back. He did not seek to escape then, but hurled himself at them, seeking to reach . . . to reach . . .

The memory faded. Anger swelled, but he let it flow over him and away. Holding to the memory of the scene, he analysed what he did remember. He had been bone weary, his swords unnaturally heavy. No, he realized, not just weary.

I was old!

The shock of the memory made him rise again and return to the mirror. The face he saw was young, the skin unlined, the close-cropped hair dark and shining with health.

The image returned with sickening intensity.

A broad-bladed spear plunged into his side. He winced at the pain of it, the hot, agonizing rush of blood over ripped flesh. The spear all but disembowelled him. A mortal wound. He killed the wielder with a reverse cut, and staggered on. The Zharn king screamed at his guards to protect him. Four of them charged - huge men bearing bronze axes. They died bravely. The last managed to bury an axe blade into his right shoulder, almost severing the arm. The Zharn king shouted a war cry and leapt to attack him. Mortally wounded, he swayed from the king's plunging spear, the sword in his left hand cleaving through the king's side, slicing through his backbone. With an awful cry of pain and despair the Zharn king fell.

The man looked down at the skin of his shoulder. It was unmarked. As was his side. There was not a scar upon his flesh. Was he seeing visions of the future, then? Was this how he was to die?

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A cold breeze blew in from the balcony. He rose and searched the room. By the far wall was a tall chest of drawers. The top drawer contained carefully folded clothing.

Removing the first item, he saw that it was a thigh-length tunic of fine blue wool. He pulled it on, then opened the second drawer. Here he found several pairs of leggings, some in wool, others in soft leather. Choosing a pair in dark, polished leather, he donned them. They fitted perfectly.

Hearing footsteps outside his door he stepped away from the chest and waited, his mind tense, his body relaxed.

An elderly man entered, bearing a tray on which was set a plate of cured meats, and smoked cheeses. The man glanced at him nervously, but said nothing. He moved to the larger table, set down the tray and backed away towards the door.

'Wait!'

The elderly man stopped, eyes downcast.

'Who are you?'

Mumbling something under his breath, the tray-bearer rushed from the room. Only after he had departed did the man manage to piece together the answer he had given. The words were familiar, but somehow mangled. He had said: 'Just a servant, sir.' The man had heard: 'Jezzesarvanser.'

Moments later a second figure appeared in the doorway, a tall man with iron grey hair, receding at the temples. He was lean, and slightly round-shouldered, his eyes deep and piercingly green. His clothes were sombre, a tunic shirt of grey satin and leggings of black wool. He smiled nervously. 'Mataianter?' he asked.

Might I enter. The man in the bedroom gestured for him to step inside.

The newcomer began to speak swiftly. The man held up his hand and spoke. 'I am having difficulty understanding your dialect. Speak slowly.'

'Of course. Language shifts, changes and grows. Can you understand me now?' the other asked, speaking clearly and enunciating his words. The man nodded. 'I know you will have many questions,' said the newcomer, pulling shut the door behind him, 'and they will all be answered in time.' He glanced down at the man's bare feet. 'There are several pairs of shoes and two pairs of boots in the closet yonder,' he said, pointing to a panel against the far wall. 'You will find all the clothes fit you well.'

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