

Aestar

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to David

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How To Pronounce The Words In This Book:

Aestar (eh-stahr')

Powerdom (pware'-dum)

Yarhim (yah-reem')

Caukast (kow'-kahst)

Masha (mah'-szha)

Ethella (eh-theh'-luh)

Renais (reh-nigh')

Saxophone (sax'-oh-fone)

Chapter One:

Birth

At 4:49 a.m. on the morning of June 2 in the year 1132, a baby was born. He wasn't incredibly large or overly small. He didn't cry too much or too little. But when he did stop crying and you could look deep into his eyes, you could tell that there was a power and a strength there that had already outgrown his small, weak frame. Something that, one day, would change the fate of many.

This would come as no surprise to you if you knew that the baby's father was Yarhim, king of Powerdom, and that his mother was Lahoyen, a strong, beautiful lady who would have made a fine queen in years to come.

She was never given the chance. Before the small child was one year old, Lahoyen died of a strange disease. By that time, the power inside the child had grown to a maturity beyond his years that, in time, earned the respect of all within the castle.

Yarhim was determined that his son would become a fine king, and insisted that the best training available to him as early in life as possible. Aestar, for that was the child's name, was given a wooden sword the moment he could lift it. He was known to waddle about the palace

courtyards, swinging his weapon at anything that moved, and some things that didn't.

When Aestar turned three, his father gave him his first bow, the finest money could buy for someone so small. It was almost as long as he was tall, but he played with it in the archery ranges all day long, shooting at the red and white targets his father had pasted onto bales of hay with wooden arrows that Yarhim commanded be carved for his son. Aestar would often shoot at wooden posts or designs in the ceiling or walls, rejoicing when his target was hit. Once, he even shot and broke a porcelain bowl that was propped up against the wall. His father was very angry, and Aestar never shot at anything other than his hay bales again.

At the age of five, Aestar received a personal trainer and a new, metal sword with a blunt tip. He learned how to fight with both the old and new, how to parry and lunge and riposte and thrust, and how to shoot moving targets with his bow and arrows. He quickly became both an excellent archer and a fine swordsman.

Aestar practiced for many years and improved his skills so drastically that even his trainer began to doubt himself against the young prince. He was known to have an adventurous spirit, a trait which many of the older members of the royal court remembered from his father during his younger days.

On the eve of Aestar's eighth birthday, Yarhim decided that his son

was old enough to begin his studies in the histories and the laws of his kingdom. He made the announcement at dinner and presented Aestar with a quill pen of his own. Aestar was so excited he could barely finish dinner or sleep that night. He lay awake in bed for hours, admiring his quill pen and thinking of what tomorrow would be like for him. Finally, as the palace clock chimed 10 o'clock, he fell asleep.

As the palace clock chimed 10, a dark shadow drifted through the courtyard. It stopped for a moment at the archery range and picked up the prince's bow and arrows. Proceeding to a small side door, it slipped inside and made its way swiftly and silently upstairs. Gliding down the hallway, it entered Aestar's room. The prince stirred in his sleep, but did not wake.

Quickly snatching up Aestar's wooden sword, the shadow withdrew a damp cloth from his tunic and placed it over the sleeping child's nose and mouth. Within seconds the prince passed from a natural to a drugged sleep. Working quickly, the shadow picked up the limp body and carried it out of the castle and to a horse that had been tied to a tree outside the palace walls. Propping the body up on the horse's back, the shadow nimbly leapt up behind it. He smiled as he rode away. No one would miss him for another week at least.

The next day at the palace was a chaotic one. The prince was not in

his bed, and a frantic commenced. His metal training sword and quill pen had been left behind. One servant found a note in a drawer in the table next to Aestar's bed. It read:

*Father, I am going to May Port to board a ship
to sea. Please forgive me if I make you cry. I
want to see the rest of the world.*

~Aestar

A watch was kept at May Port for years after. The prince was never found.

The headline of Basohm's newspaper the day after the prince's disappearance read as follows:

PRINCE AESTAR
RAN FROM HOME
NO HEIR TO THE THRONE REMAINS

Chapter Two:

Rescue

Aestar slowly opened his eyes. The hot light from the bright sun blinded them, and they quickly closed of their own accord. He began to move his head, but then stopped. He was in too much pain to move. He lay very still for a few minutes, trying to recover some strength and remember how he got here and where he was. His fingertips scraped across the hard, sandy ground as his hand closed to form a tight fist. He lay his head to one side and tried to open his eyes again without the sun blinding him. All he could see for miles and miles was the same orange-brown dirt. He turned his head to the other side and was greeted by the same bleak terrain. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back. He soon passed into a light, tormented sleep.

Several hours later, the prince woke to the sound of distant hoof beats. Cautiously opening his eyes, Aestar found the bright sun no longer staring in his face. He began to sit up. A sharp pain shot through his leg and he lay back down. He closed his eyes as the hoof-beats drew nearer. He heard horses come to a stop near to him.

“What do you serpose it is?” a gruff voice asked.

“It’s a child, you dunce!” another voice replied. “What I want to

know is who is it and what's he doin' here!"

"What should we do with 'im?" yet another voice questioned.

"Stand back, men!" shouted a very different voice with a heavy accent. Aestar heard the sound of horses moving and a man dismounting, and felt the presence of someone kneeling beside him. He felt the pressure of a hand first on his chest and then his head. "He's still alive," the voice said. "We must bring him back to camp." The pressure relented from his head. "Oh, look at this."

A searing pain shot through Aestar's right leg. He cried out in severe pain. Then he passed out.

Aestar started awake. His eyes snapped open and were greeted by the sight of the leather ceiling of a large tent. He sat up and looked around. His right ankle was wrapped in thick layers of hide. He was sitting on a small table about three feet above the ground. His bow and his sword lay on the ground next to the table. He tried to remember who he was, how he had gotten here, where he had come from...

At that moment the tent door was pushed aside and a small, yellow man walked in. He was no taller than five feet, with matted, black hair almost covering his eyes, which were dark brown. His broad nose sliced through the center of his round face.

"Ah!" the man said with a thick accent. "He is awake! Do you feel

better now?”

“Yes, sir,” Aestar replied.

“Ah, he has manners. That’s a good thing. Few of our men do.”

The man busied himself with adjusting something beneath Aestar’s bed.

“Where am I sir?”

“I will show you, young sir. Can you walk yet?”

Aestar tried to move his leg again. “I don’t think so, sir.”

“Well then, I will carry you.” Aestar looked again at the small man’s pudgy arms and legs and was surprised when they were able to lift him off the table and carry him out of the tent.

Once outside, Aestar looked around him. He was in what resembled a military camp with tents aligned in neat rows along the ground. Men were casually fencing with each other and shooting at leather targets, it seemed, almost everywhere Aestar looked.

“You are in a village full of mostly outcasts and runaways, just outside of the kingdom of Powerdom. We have scarce 50 men here at Caukast, but we get by very nicely. There is always a herd of buffalo to hunt for food or skins or a caravan we can rob for supplies. Bufner!”

“Yeah, what is it, Masha?” A large man over six feet tall lazily stepped out of a nearby tent.

“Get everyone together at the main archery range. I want them to meet our newest recruit,” Masha answered.

Bufner examined the small child with disgruntled surprise. “Him? But Masha, he’s only a boy,” Bufner protested.

“I will hear no argument,” Masha replied. “Tell everyone to meet me by the archery range.”

There were a few already at the archery range when Masha arrived there with Aestar in his arms. Most of the men looked to be in their late or early twenties — some were older, some younger — but one man in particular stood out as being much, much older than the rest.

“That is my father,” Masha told Aestar. “He founded the Caukast tribe when he was newly married, about 25 years old. My mother was killed by the king’s soldiers and my father took me and fled into the western wilderness to survive in hiding. I was just a small boy at the time. We learned to live out in the wilderness by hunting buffalo and robbing travelers that came our way. At first it was just the two of us, but then more and more men joined our tribe. Some of them had been thrown out of their own homes and most of them were wanted by the law. All of them were searching in the desert for place to live and survive away from the society that had condemned them, and most were amazed to find us here. My father welcomed them in and allowed them to live with us as long as they would work for their food. He was strong in his youth, but now he is getting too old to manage our affairs. He is still strong, but he may not stay that way for long, so I am learning to take over physical leadership of the men of

Caukast.”

By this time, most everyone was crowded into or around at the archery range, so Masha turned to make an announcement.

“Caukast,” he began loudly. “This boy is our newest and youngest member of the tribe. Whoever does not like him does not like me, and we all should know what that means.” Several men nodded and mumbled their approval. “You will treat him with the same respect you treat me. All understood?” There was silence. “Good, then.” Masha continued. “We’ll let the boy know some of your names.” He beckoned a man forward and began the introductions.

“This is Hargo,” he said. “He is our best buffalo hunter and an excellent swordsman.”

“Pleased to make an acquaintance,” Hargo said. The older man had a deep, soft voice and firm muscles. His grip was firm as he reached out to shake Aestar’s hand.

“And this is Cremshaw,” Masha continued. “Some may claim that cooking is a woman’s job, but Cremshaw here could out-cook anyone,” he proudly stated.

“Aw, that’s not quite true,” Cremshaw replied modestly as he tipped his hat and shook the boy’s hand. “All I ever have to cook with out here is buffalo.”

“And he does a mighty fine job with it. Over here is Jaclin and

Lefrant. They oversee our military operations.”

“Kid, I’m sure you’ll make a fine addition to our army,” Lefrant said.

“Not that there’s much of an army to add to,” Jaclin added jokingly.

“I think that’s all the important citizens,” Masha said to groans and humorous whining. “You’ll get to know the rest eventually. I think you’d do best now if you...”

At that moment, an arrow whizzed through Aestar’s thick hair and landed with a thump in the center of a leather target some 50 yards beyond him. A small figure stepped out from behind a tent.

“Don’t worry. I’m just keepin’ everybody alert,” it said.

“You’re late, again,” Masha said to the figure. To Aestar he said, “Boy, this is Ethella, the only female here and previously the youngest among the Caukast. She is the best archer we have. Some say she could hit a flea a half-mile away.”

“Pleased to meetcha,” Ethella said, stretching out her hand to Aestar. Aestar shook it. She looked about 11 years old, but could easily have been older. Her hair came down to about her shoulders and matched the color of the dirt carpet covering the floor of the camp. Her skin had the same orange tinge to it, and gave her the appearance of having worked long and hard in the dusty soil. Her steely green eyes pierced into his, as if trying to determine something.

“So, what’s your name?” she asked.

“Why, we were all so busy telling the boy our names we never asked him his,” Masha said. “Tell us, boy, Where are you from?”

Aestar struggled to remember. Bits and pieces of memories floated about in his mind. He tried desperately to remember anything, anything that would tell these people where he had come from and how he had come here. Everything was nothing more than a blur inside of his head. One fact, however, suddenly stood out as being certain.

He took a deep breath. “My name is Aestar.”

Chapter Three:

Tests

After several weeks, Aestar's ankle healed itself, and he was brought outside to the main training ground to begin his training as a member of the Caukast. Everyone in the camp gathered to see this young boy learn how to survive in the wilderness.

Masha began. "When we found you, you had your own bow with you. I assume, then, that you already know how to shoot?"

"I guess so, sir," Aestar responded.

Masha handed him his bow. "Show us," he said.

Aestar fingered his bow for a moment, unsure of what to do.

"Your arrow, Aestar?" Masha held out an arrow to the young boy.

An arrow, Aestar thought. As though snapping into a prerecorded motion, his left hand held the bow in front of him while his right reached behind him and grabbed at the air.

Masha laughed. "So you use a quiver, do you, boy? Hargo, fetch Aestar a quiver."

"Yes sir," Hargo replied, hurrying off. He returned a few minutes later with a quiver that was likely the smallest they had. It almost reached

down past Aestar's thighs. The strap fit him well enough with several knots tied in it.

Masha placed several arrows in the quiver. "Show us how well you can shoot, Aestar," he commanded doubtfully.

In a flash, the first arrow was fitted to the string. Taking aim quickly and awkwardly, Aestar let the arrow fly through the air and hit the center of the buffalo hide. The next arrow flew soon after, hitting the center mark on the second target. Down the line he went, hitting bullseye after bullseye until he reached behind him and discovered he had no more arrows. He paused, unsure of what to do. A sound of shock and astonishment most resembling silence rose from the crowd. They had never seen one so young shoot so well.

Masha raised his hands. "That is enough," he said. "We all can see Aestar will make a fine archer someday. Aestar, you will train for no more than an hour every day at the archery range with Ethella. Ethella, you will practice with him our Creative Shooting Challenges to increase his archery skills.

"Now Aestar, you were also found with your own sword, so I also assume that you know how to fence to some degree. Is that correct?"

"I guess so, sir," Aestar said.

"Lefrant!" Masha shouted. "Fetch this boy a fitting mail vest, and get your own vest and a practice sword.

“Yes, siree,” Lefrant said as he turned towards the weapons tent. He returned wearing his own equipment carrying a mail vest for the boy.

Lefrant led Aestar to a ring marked by wooden pegs driven into the ground. Aestar slipped the heavy mail coat over his shirt and lifted his sword from the ground. An old strength flowed through his small arms. He walked to the center of the ring where Lefrant was waiting for him. He lifted his sword and touched it to Lefrant’s. They lingered together for a second. Then, with a flick of the wrist, Lefrant began the test.

Back and forth, forth and back they parried, lunging and deflecting, striking again and again. Aestar’s small form enabled him to skillfully dodge Lefrant’s experienced blows. Their swords moved like lightning around the ring.

Then, very suddenly, the movement stopped. Lefrant’s dull blade had paused an inch in front of Aestar’s chest. Glaring at him, Aestar batted the sword quickly away and swung at Lefrant, who lifted his sword just in time to stop Aestar’s attack.

The battle began anew, blades slicing through the thin air, each participant dripping with sweat and gasping for breath every now and then. Once, Lefrant stabbed furiously at Aestar. Aestar dropped to the ground, missing the blow by a hair’s width, and rolled to a safe distance before standing up again. He flew at Lefrant, and the test continued.

Then, very suddenly, the movement stopped again. Aestar’s dull

blade had paused in midair, barely touching Lefrant's mail vest. Lefrant looked up at Masha.

Masha's face broke into a wide smile. "What do you think, Lefrant?"

Lefrant nodded solemnly. "We'll be able to find some use for him," he replied.

Masha nodded, pleased. He squinted as he looked up at the sun. "It's almost time for lunch. Cremshaw, how soon can you have a meal ready?"

"Way ahead of you, sir," Cremshaw said. "I've already had the meat roasting for a few hours now. I can finish it up now and have it ready to eat in a half an hour."

"Alright. Everybody, meet at the mess tent in a half an hour," Masha shouted.

As everyone went back to their tents, Bufner pulled Aestar aside.

"Hey kid, how'd you learn to do that?" he asked. "You know, the shooting and sword play and stuff. That was amazing! How do you do that? Special training, maybe?"

Aestar was silent for a moment. "I don't know."

"Aestar!" Ethella called to him, running from across the camp. He walked out to meet her.

"You did pretty good back there, Aestar." Aestar nodded his head. "Looks like I'm gonna be training with you for a while." Aestar nodded his

head. “Why don’t we start tomorrow morning after breakfast? Is that okay?” Aestar nodded his head again. “You don’t seem to talk a lot,” Ethella said. “Is there something wrong?”

“No,” Aestar said. “I still can’t remember anything about my life before I came here, and it’s just starting to bother me. I’ve been here for a couple of weeks now, and I still haven’t remembered anything. I don’t know who I was before I came here or how I learned to do what I’m doing now or anything, really. It’s just... hard.”

“Oh. Okay. If you ever remember anything about your old home and stuff, you can come tell me, okay?”

“Okay.” Aestar looked up. “Tomorrow after breakfast?”

Ethella smiled. “Yep, tomorrow.” She began to walk away. “See ya at lunch!”

“See ya!”

Chapter Four:

Deception

The next day after breakfast, Aestar made his way to the archery range. Ethella was already there and waiting for him.

“How’d you like breakfast?” she asked.

Aestar grinned. “Oh, buffalo gets a little old after a while, I guess.”

Ethella rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it,” she groaned.

“What am I shooting at today?” Aestar asked.

“Well,” Ethella said, “Today I thought we would see if you were ever taught how to shoot moving targets. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure, I guess,” Aestar replied, taking the bow and quiver Ethella held out to him. He strapped the quiver onto his back while Ethella picked up a buffalo skin drum from the ground.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready,” Aestar responded.

Ethella threw the drum in a high arc through the air. Immediately, Aestar had an arrow fitted to the string. He released it and it pierced a neat hole in the center of the skin drum.

Ethella clapped softly. “Very good. *Very* good.” She thought for a

minute to herself. “Good. Now I’d like you to practice a skill that will be essential in battle, whenever we’ll have one of those. Turn your back to me and face the camp. When I say ‘Go!’, turn around, find your target, and shoot it.” She paused for a moment. “Did you get all of that?”

“Yep,” Aestar replied, turning around. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Ethella threw another drum into the air. “Go!” she shouted.

Aestar spun around, grabbing an arrow out of his quiver as he did. The drum reached the top of its arc as he readied the arrow. He had time to aim only before his arrow touched the bowstring. It clumsily slid from between his fingers as the drum began its descent. The arrow missed the drum by a hair’s breadth, falling feather-end up into the ground a hundred yards away.

Ethella ran to pick up the untouched buffalo skin drum. “Do you want to try again?”

“Sure,” Aestar said, relaxing his arms and turning around again.

When Ethella shouted ‘go’ again, he was ready. His arrow shot through the drum just inches inside the rim. Aestar let out a big breath and looked at Ethella.

“You’re a fast learner, Aestar,” Ethella said. “Let’s try it again.”

Aestar and Ethella worked for the rest of the hour on reacting quickly to different types of targets. Aestar was pleased at the end of his training session. He thoroughly enjoyed learning new skills over remembering

old ones.

Aestar worked with Ethella for the next few months on improving his archery skills. By then, Ethella had nothing left to teach him, so they ended the lessons, although Aestar continued to practice at the archery range every day.

He also attended the daily training sessions for the Caukast army. Lefrant and Jaclin kept a small army trained and ready in case the need should ever arise for them to take part in organized warfare. Aestar practiced running obstacle courses and marching in formation, though he could barely see above the soldier in front of him. Each year he moved up in rank until he became the second in command to Lefrant and Jaclin at the age of 13.

During his stay with the Caukast tribe, Aestar went on many buffalo hunts and raided many caravans. One of his most memorable excursions was shortly after his thirteenth birthday.

Hargo rushed through the camp, looking for Masha. He found him in his tent.

“A caravan,” Hargo gasped, out of breath. “Buffalo hunters. From Near Estang. There are almost a hundred men, and well armed, too. They are carrying a lot of equipment that we could well use.”

“One hundred men? All just buffalo hunting?”

“Yes, sir.”

Masha breathed out hard. “Fetch Lefrant, Jaclin, and Aestar and bring them here to me,” he said.

When the three arrived at Masha’s tent, he had a map out on a table. “Hargo,” he questioned. “Where is their camp?”

“Right here.” Hargo planted his finger on the map. “About ten miles east of our territory.”

“Thank you, Hargo. That’s all I’ll need from you for now.” Hargo nodded his head, then turned and left.

“Men,” Masha addressed his military leaders. “We have, unaware of our position, a well-armed buffalo hunting caravan ten miles off our borders, with an indispensable cargo. They number more than 100 men. How do you suggest we get a hold of it?”

“We can’t risk an open confrontation,” Jaclin noted. “We’ll have to rely on stealth and secrecy.”

“Perhaps we could create a distraction,” Aestar suggested.

“We could never risk one of our men being fired at,” Lefrant said. “And besides, they would notice a band of 25 men or so grabbing their belongings out of their tents.”

“What if we created a distraction that they wouldn’t dare fire on, for their honor and the honor of their country,” Aestar challenged.

“Even if that were possible,” Jaclin argued, “We would still have the problem of getting to their belongings. How do you suggest we get our men

into their camp without being noticed?”

Aestar smiled. “One at a time.”

The buffalo hunter squinted up at the sun. *Almost directly overhead*, he thought. *Almost time for the midday meal. I wonder what we'll be having... to... day...* His vision shifted down to the horizon. His eyes grew wide. “Malanda!” he shouted. “Come quickly!”

When Malanda arrived, the hunter pointed to the horizon. “Malanda, what do you see?”

Malanda squinted his eyes. “Wevron,” he said, “I see a... a human figure!”

At that moment, the figure collapsed. Malanda and Wevron rushed to its rescue. Upon reaching it, they turned the body face up. The pale face of Masha’s father stared up at them.

“He’s injured, Wevron,” Malanda said. “Help me get him back to camp.”

When they arrived at Wevron’s tent, Malanda went to get some food and drink for the ‘poor old man’. When he returned with some duck soup and a skinful of wine, their guest had begun to revive. Wevron offered some food to Masha’s father, who was now able to sit up to receive the food.

“Tell us, old man,” Malanda said. “What were you doing all by

yourself way out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Traveling,” Masha’s father gasped in between spoonfuls. “To... Archainia... with a caravan.”

“Where is your caravan?”

“All... dead. Wild... desert men... kill them. I escaped.”

“He’s delirious,” Wevron said. Who wouldn’t be after this long alone in the desert? Wild desert men?”

“No, he may be all right,” Malanda said. “I have heard stories of this desert tribe. They waylay helpless caravans and steal what they can from them. Tell me, old man, in what direction does their camp lie?”

“To... the north... 10 miles... maybe more.”

Malanda turned to Wevron. “Tell all the men to ready their arms and meet me at the north of the camp. We may not catch us a buffalo today, but we will catch us a band of outlaws!”

Malanda prepared his men to leave, commanding a group of ten or so to stay behind to watch the camp. Wevron, against his will, was chosen as one of them. He watched the rest of the camp ride away over the next hill, then turned and walked back to his tent to check on the old man.

The ‘poor old man’ was gone. *That’s odd,* Wevron thought. *He must have revived pretty quickly. Maybe he went looking for more food.*

As he stepped outside, Wevron heard a low cry and saw a stray

cloak moving over by the weapons' tent. Puzzled, he walked over to investigate.

There was no one outside the weapons' tent. He went inside and looked around to find that there were no more than two swords left where ten should have been and more than a few quivers of arrows gone. Puzzled, he stepped outside and crossed to the mess tent. He found no old man, but the crates of food that he had set out for lunch were missing. Turning outside once more, he heard more muffled cries and footsteps, this time coming from he knew not where. Becoming more frantic and confused, he ran quickly to return to his own tent.

Inside, he found one of his men sitting on the bed, hands and feet tied together and gag over his mouth. Shocked and frightened, Wevron leapt forward to untie his friend. The man grunted worriedly, and Wevron felt a hard blow across the back of his skull. Then everything went black.

When Malanda returned to the camp several hours later, he found Wevron, along with the other nine, gagged and tied hand and foot. Taped to Wevron's back was this message:

*The wild desert men have been here
You can't fight us without weapons
You can't travel far without supplies
You can run, but you can't hide*

Chapter Five:

Evil

In the castle at Basohm, Yarhim sat upon his throne, head in hand. Detracur, his royal messenger, stood beside him. Detracur had come with a message from Toolput, the lord of the Northern Kingdom under Powerdom.

“Toolput says the people of Minibad are complaining about a water shortage in their county,” Detracur said. “And Farbad has accused Minibad of stealing their water from them. These two counties have been quarreling for a long time. Perhaps it is time you go intervene for Lord Toolput.”

“Toolput is wise,” Yarhim replied. “I will leave him be for a while longer. He will figure out a way to make the two counties come to peace. What other news is there from the Northern Kingdom?”

“Tractus is not taking the ban on trade with Denethen Taur very well. He has been sending threats of invasion to Othaty, though I highly doubt he will actually carry them out.”

“Yes,” Yarhim said thoughtfully. “Denethen Taur has been Powerdom’s friend and ally far too long to be angered so much by such a safety precaution as closing trade routes between us. We were receiving too many complaints of the deceitful nature of Tractus’s merchants. It was the

best thing to do.”

“It was, my liege,” Detracur replied.

Yarhim sat thinking for several minutes, his head in his hands. “We must not anger Durneth,” he said finally. “Send Tractus this message : ‘I, Yarhim, king of Powerdom, to the lord Tractus of Denethen Taur. I have no wish to offend your royal person or to dishonor your fair kingdom or its people. Send a gift of your choosing to Toolput of the Northern Kingdom or myself in Basohm and I will restore the trade route between you kingdom and mine, if only temporarily.’ That is all. Give him my royal seal, Detracur, and go.”

“Immediately, your highness,” Detracur said, turning quickly and running out the door.

Tractus looked out of the fortress of Durneth, high among the Northern Mountains, surveying his kingdom of Denethen Taur. He smiled to himself. *All this is mine*, he thought. *My subjects. My kingdom. Soon to be the most powerful kingdom in the world.*

A knock on the door withdrew him from his meditation. “Who is it?” he called.

The door opened a crack and a timid face popped in. “It is Detracur, my Lord.” Detracur stepped through the door and closed it behind him. “I come with news from Yarhim.”

“Ah, Yarhim, the old fool,” Tractus murmured. “What does he say now?”

“He says that he has no wish to anger your highness, and that he will restore trade with Denethen Taur as soon as you prove yourself worthy with a gift to either his lord Toolput or himself.”

Tractus snickered. “The anger of Durneth was turned against him ever since the beginning. Can he not see it?”

“He suspects nothing, your highness,” Detracur assured him.

Tractus began to pace back and forth. “The time to strike is soon. We must attack with our full force before Yarhim discovers our true actions and intentions. He is weak now, and victory will be a simple matter. Detracur, get me a map.”

“Yes, your highness,” Detracur said, bowing as he snatched a large scroll off a shelf on the inside wall of the tower. He quickly spread it out on a table in the center of the room.

Tractus studied it for a moment. “Bergum Lake,” he said finally, pointing to the place on the map where the great lake lay. “It lies well within our borders. And the Centregum,” he said, dragging his finger down across the paper, “Runs out of Bergum and across the Northern Mountains, right through the center of Powerdom. It is a perfect road.”

“The perfect road for what, sir?”

Tractus smiled. “The perfect road for a victorious army.”

The watchman at the dock shifted his weight from one foot to the other. It was about four in the morning; time for his shift be over. The sky was beginning to lighten with the prospect of dawn, and all was peaceful and still.

Then he saw something coming down the river. He leaned forward and peered up the Centregum river at the dark shape floating towards him.

“Hey, Sparrow, your shift is over.” Sparrow’s replacement stepped out onto the dock. “Sparrow, your shift is over,” he repeated. “You can go now.” He turned his head to follow Sparrow’s gaze and spotted the shape.

“What do you suppose it is?” Sparrow asked.

“Look like a ship of some type,” the other man replied.

“At this time of night?”

The two men looked at each other for a moment, then returned their attention to the advancing object floating down the river.

As it came closer, it appeared to be a small cargo raft with one man aboard, operating the poles. As he pushed in towards the dock, he called out to the two men to help him dock his ship.

“What are you doing shipping down the Centregum at this time of night?” Sparrow asked the boatman.

“I’m under orders to deliver this cargo to the Lord Toolput as soon as is possible,” the boatman replied with a heavy Irish accent. “I’m told all

boxes are to be delivered with the seal intact and untouched. I'm also told that it is a gift from the Lord Tractus of Durneth of Denethen Taur."

Sparrow quickly checked one of the seals. It was Tractus's personal seal. He had seen it only once before.

"What's the soonest you can get these to Toolput?" the boatman asked.

Sparrow breathed in quickly. "Tomorrow," he said decidedly. "These boxes will be in Lord Toolput's throne room by noon tomorrow."

Chapter Six:

Columbus

Aestar yawned as he rolled off his bed and onto the brushed dirt floor. Grunting, he stumbled to his feet and grabbed for his shirt. Pulling it over his head, he leisurely made his way to the mess tent.

After a delicious breakfast of fried buffalo, Aestar and Ethella stepped out of the mess tent and headed for the archery range for their daily practice time. They were stopped by Bufner, who was dragging a man dressed in royal garments by the arm.

“I caught this man running just outside of our camp,” Bufner said. “I believe he has information we can use.”

“Bring him to Masha’s tent. Ethella, go get Masha. I think he’s still inside.” Aestar’s eyes casually met those of Bufner’s captive. The man’s eyes were wide with astonishment and fear. “What is it?” Aestar asked him.

“Y — your face!” the man stammered. “Y — you have the — the eyes. Y — younger — he is old. A — at Basohm...”

“What are you talking about?” Bufner grunted gruffly. “Speak clearly!”

The man swallowed. “Yarhim.”

“I have checked all the information he has given us,” Masha addressed the few persons in the tent. “He tells no lies. We seem to have interrupted a very important message from Basohm to the fortress of Durneth. It appears that Tractus, lord of Denethen Taur in the Northern Mountains, has been in control of the Northern Kingdom of Powerdom for some time — one year exactly — without Yarhim, High King of Powerdom, having any knowledge of this development. He just recently learned that Othaty was being and had been held by Tractus for the past year. His anger is now kindled against him.”

“What does the message say?” Aestar asked.

Masha paused. “It was a declaration of war. Yarhim is now mustering his forces to ride out and take Othaty back.”

Bufter stood up abruptly, then sat back down. “This is madness! Tractus has many times the strength of Yarhim’s. His forces will be slaughtered!”

“Why should we care,” Hargo mused, “If the Lord Tractus were indeed to defeat Yarhim? What would we lose if Powerdom were to fall under the rule of Tractus?”

“You forget,” Aestar added, “That, once he occupied Powerdom and had enslaved all of its inhabitants, Tractus would only long for more territory to be under his control. He would explore the miles of desert both to

the west and east of Powerdom, he would find us, and he would kill us. He has heard of us, and we have killed many of his men. He will not forget it. All will be lost for us.”

“Well, said, young sir,” Masha replied, “And a more fitting mouth I could not find to utter those words.”

Aestar looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Masha turned to the messenger. “Do you wish to tell him the second part of your message?”

The messenger nodded briefly before beginning. “Have you all heard the story of what happened to the King’s son?” he asked. All present shook their heads except Masha.

“I have heard it many times,” the Caukast leader said, “But you may tell it for their sakes.” He nodded toward the group sitting silently at the table.

“Very well.” The messenger began. “Seven years ago, Yarhim’s son mysteriously disappeared. A note was found in his room stating that he had decided to run away, but many people didn’t believe it, for whatever reason. Some believed that someone had kidnapped and possibly killed him, maybe in an attempt to rid Powerdom of its rulers so that it would be weaker and easier to take. The suspicion of the common people immediately fell on Tractus, and then Detracur when he left Yarhim to join Tractus shortly after Othaty was taken.

“The King, however, was quite reluctant to believe that his friend Tractus would ever be a part of something as low and base as a kidnapping. However, I believe that Detracur, who was his chief advisor and messenger, had been poisoning his mind with false ideas of Tractus and Denethen Taur, so that, when he left, Yarhim finally began to distrust the name of Durneth. He investigated, and found that the forces of Durneth had secretly been holding almost all of the Northern Kingdom, with the exception of the southern province of Estang, for several months.”

“But what about the child?” Ethella interrupted. “What happened to the child?”

“No one knows,” the messenger continued. “Some believe that he perished at the hand of Tractus. Some believe that Tractus brought him to be raised in Denethen Taur as one of his own subjects, and that Tractus will eventually use him to fight against his own people — such are Tractus’s sick and twisted ways. But most people believe that he will return to save his people when the time is right.”

“But what does any of that have to do with us?” Bufner queried. “Why did you tell us?”

“Because your friend here is approximately the age that the missing prince would be were he still alive, and I have been told that he also bears the name that the prince was given at birth, Aestar.”

“It is a common enough name in the Northern Kingdom,” Lefrant

argued. “And I am certain you could find a good many boys of his age bearing it as their own.”

“But none with the same likeness to King Yarhim,” the messenger replied. “I have been a faithful servant of the King’s for many years, almost since the beginning of his reign, and I can assure you that your boy here is the very image of Yarhim as he was in his younger days. The very manner in which he holds himself is kingly. I assure you all, I am certain that we have found the long lost Prince Aestar.”

Aestar was sitting up perfectly straight in his chair by the end of this speech, rigid and short of breath. At this last statement he collapsed back into his chair, breathing hard.

“It is settled then,” Masha said. “The heir to the throne of Powerdom shall help to regain his kingdom from the northern enemy.”

Ethella leaned forward in her seat. “Where do we start?”

Chapter Seven:

Inklings

Masha swiftly pulled a map of Powerdom out of his dirty tunic.

“The plan,” he explained, “Is to enter Powerdom undetected, make our way to Othaty without seeming conspicuous, then penetrate the castle at Othaty — again, undetected — and then wreak havoc on the enemy from within their walls.” He paused here. “Though we cannot defeat them, and we will pay for it with our lives dearly, it should confuse and dishevel the forces of Durneth, preparing them for an easy defeat at the hand of Yarhim.”

“This is no easy task you speak of,” Jaclin argued. “For 50 disheveled, unkempt men to enter Near Estang from the wilderness, and later Othaty from there, without attracting attention of any kind is a feat in itself. the rest of what you suggest is madness! How will we ever be able to accomplish this?”

“Sir,” Aestar said calmly. “How do you eat a buffalo?”

The sun was all but out of sight in the city. A peasant dressed in rags stood at a fishermen’s cart near the center of the market of Near Estang. After bartering for a short time with the fishermen over the price of

a handful of fish, the peasant walked away with a basket in hand, filled with that night's meal.

The peasant continued walking through the streets, eventually turning down alleys and dark streets leading away from the loud noises of the marketplace. Finally, the peasant turned in through a doorway and, shutting the door behind, turned to the lone figure in the dark room. Throwing back her loose hood, the peasant let her hair fall down just over her shoulders.

“Did you find the men?” the figure said. He was seated at a small, wooden table in the center of the room.

“Yes.” The girl in rags set her basket down on the table and sat down. “They are scattered about the city in abandoned houses and stores. Some are living with families or in inns or taverns for the time being.”

“Where is Masha?”

“He'll be here shortly. He said he would find the best route to Othaty from here.” She motioned to the basket on the table. “I picked up some dinner on the way here.”

“I see that,” the figure said, peering under the cloth that covered the basket.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. The two people sitting at the table turned to answer it and, before either of them could say a word in response, the door flew open, flooding the room with light and

hurting their eyes.

Masha stepped through the open doorway with a lantern held high in his hand. “Aestar? Ethella?” he said, lowered the lantern, and squinting into the dim light. He turned to shut the door, then started walking to the table.

“It’s us,” Aestar said. “Do you have the map?”

“Right here with me,” Masha replied. In one swift movement he set the lantern gently on the edge of the table, withdrew a tightly bound roll of paper from the folds of his cloak, and, spreading the parchment out over the table, took a seat between Aestar and Ethella.

The map — which he had probably purchased at a local mapmaker’s — was one of Near Estang and Othaty, as well as southern Archainia and the northern part of Far Estang. A single bridge crossing the Centregum River from Near Estang to Othaty was circled in a thick, dark ink, and several lines of the same style led west, away from the bridge, to certain points surrounding the castle.

“The only access point into Othaty from the west of the Centregum river is the bridge that I have circled here. It should be a simple matter to get our men across it, so long as they don’t bring attention to themselves. Traffic is constantly passing over the bridge, and it will be quite easy for them to blend in. Once across the bridge, they would follow these routes here to houses surrounding the castle.”

Aestar stood up and circled the table slowly, processing the information he had received. “What then?” he asked.

“We will have several options at that point,” Masha continued. “The first is that we send one or two of our men to sneak into the castle and have him — or her — open the gates for the rest of us.”

“And our second option?” Aestar asked.

“Launch a full assault on the castle. This would involve crossing the water-filled moat and climbing over the castle walls while staying generally unnoticed, preferably in the dark of the night. I do not like the thought of this, as our men are not accustomed to open battle, but to deceptive raids. However, I will abide by your decision.”

Aestar bit his lip. “Send word to the men. Take your map and assign them locations very near the castle. Meet Ethella and I at this corner in front of the castle. We will be waiting for you.”

Masha nodded, then quickly grabbed the map off the table and walked out the door, shutting it behind him. Aestar and Ethella looked at each other. A thin grin spread across Aestar’s face.

Yarhim stood on the battlements of his castle in Basohm, nervously looking out over his lands to the north. A man entered onto the roof through a door in the east tower.

“Your majesty,” he said. “All the troops available in the Southern

Kingdom have been gathered together and prepared for war, as were your orders.”

“Yes, they were,” Yarhim mused, turning to greet his general.

“How many men does it amount to?” he asked.

“About 300 foot, sir.”

Yarhim slowly turned back to face the north. “300 foot soldiers against the strongest fortress in all Powerdom. I saw to the fortification of that castle myself. Tractus has not only the forces of his own kingdom, Denethen Taur, but the traitors of Northern Powerdom as well. This assault will be a dark enterprise indeed.”

“Perhaps you could take time to form a strategy, your highness. Stealth may aid the success of this mission.”

Yarhim sighed. “No. By the time it takes us to form a strategy, Tractus will have already invaded the Southern Kingdom as well. It will be too late then, and I will *not* be found sneaking into my own castle in the dark of the night or any other time. No, Renais, this victory will be won by valor alone.”

Chapter Eight:

Crusaders

Aestar sat impatiently on a rough, wooden chair, tapping his fingers nervously on a small table in his room. The door to the outside opened and Ethella came in with a large basket in her hands. She dropped it to the floor as Aestar stood up to greet her.

“Put these on,” she said.

Yarhim’s gaze swept across the small number of foot soldiers before him, a number which was willing to give their lives for their kingdom. Did they realize the great danger that lay before them, or was he leading them blindly into this conflict? He gave the signal to his flag bearer to raise the standard of Powerdom. It flapped in the wind. Yarhim began the long march, leading his troops north to Othaty.

The guard adjusted his helmet. The sun was hot, and he was uncomfortable sitting on the wall all day. He peered down at the small figure approaching the moat.

“Hey, you! Waddaya want?” the guard shouted down rudely at the

figure.

“I have a basket of fresh fish for his majesty, Lord Tractus, as well as for anyone else who might wish to purchase them.”

“Come in, then,” the guard shouted down, more kindly this time. He let down the drawbridge. He had eaten nothing since breakfast, and he had an appetite for fried fish.

The fisherman felt under his cloak to make sure his bow was still there.

“Our men are tired and need to rest,” Yarhim’s general addressed him. “They’ve been marching all day, and it is getting late. We should stop for the night.”

“The success of our attack depends on our enemy being both unprepared for and unaware of our advance,” Yarhim. “One night’s rest will give Tractus’ spies ample time to find us. After that they will either slaughter us in our sleep or bring word to Tractus and have an army here to meet us in the morning. Such a mistake may well cost us our lives.”

“And not allowing them to rest may do the same! An exhausted army does not win victories — they stand in sleep while their enemies cut them down in large numbers. Pushing reluctant soldiers on wins neither victory nor honor.”

“Nevertheless, that is what we must do.”

“Then you had better tell the soldiers. They are beginning to complain.”

The fisherman walked across the drawbridge and into the outer courtyard. He paused for a second just inside the gate. The guard began to bring up the drawbridge. Suddenly whipping around and taking his bow out from under his cloak in one motion, the fisherman quickly fit an arrow to the string and, after aiming for one, long second, let it fly. It sliced through the thick cord holding the drawbridge up and bounced off the stone wall with a clang. The guard watched in astonishment as the drawbridge fell back down and crashed onto the street on the far side of the moat, slightly cracking the pavement. He then watched in horror as peasants began running from the street across the fallen drawbridge. The fisherman threw off his cloak, revealing the face of the King’s son. Cries of “Aestar! Aestar!” and “Yarhim’s son is returned!” reached the ear of the guard before he fell with an arrow in his back.

Yarhim silently led his troops north. He was old and had not been on a military expedition for many years. His breath was beginning to come in gasps and each step took more effort than the last. A low murmur of disapproval could be heard consistently coming from the men, straining to go on under the weight of their armor. *They are pressing on in obedience to their King,*

Yarhim thought. *And they will no doubt suffer because of it.*

The murmur grew louder with each passing minute. The restless atmosphere tensed as the men grew wearier and wearier. The men slowed until they were marching at no more than a leisurely walk.

A soldier near the front took off his helmet, threw it to the ground in frustration, and sat down on a nearby log. Several of the men near him followed his example, and soon almost half of Yarhim's forces were either sitting or lying down or beginning to make camp.

Yarhim stared in disbelief at the actions of his troops. Then, hurriedly climbing atop a rock, he began to speak.

"We must keep moving!" he shouted. "If we stop for any length of time, the enemy will find us. For victory's sake, we must go on!"

More grumbling and a few scattered looks of disapproval came from the resting soldiers. No one gave the slightest pretense of moving. This was not going well.

It was clear to the Caukast that Othaty had been taken by surprise. Guards from Denethen Taur attempted to rush to their posts, only to be cut down or shot by the Caukast outlaws, who, it seemed to the panicked guards, were everywhere. Fear had been struck in the heart of every northern soldier, and they fought less and less to defend their lord's fortress and more and more to save their own lives. Many of the traitor

Powerdomians, in their panic, threw off their northern uniforms and joined the Caukast in defending their kingdom.

The Caukast, on the other hand, were enjoying themselves greatly, watching the most powerful kingdom north of the Great Sea fall to their blades. As much as there was panic among the ranks of the Denethenian soldiers, there was vigor and pleased excitement among the outcasts.

This just might work, Aestar thought hopefully. This just might work.

Tractus' cupbearer opened the door to the throne room in Othaty and walked quickly to the bottom of the stairs leading to the throne. Tractus sat heavily slouched on the throne of Othaty, seemingly unaware that anyone had entered the afore dark and eerily empty room. He stared off into space with his chin rested upon his hand, mumbling quietly to himself.

"Your majesty," the cupbearer addressed Tractus anxiously. "An assault is being launched on your fortress as we speak. I have heard it is being led by the King's lost son." He paused, waiting for his lord to respond. "You *must* go and lead your men to defend the fortress."

Tractus started, as if he had been aroused from a deep sleep. He walked to the window, almost as though he hadn't heard a word. He looked groggily out the window at the ensuing chaos below him. He saw his men dying in every corner of the courtyard, falling to outlaws' swords. His jaw grew tight and his teeth gritted together.

“Why do I have to do everything myself,” he mumbled to himself.
“Cupbearer!” he yelled. “Get me my armor. And my sword.” A crooked grin spread across his lips. “These rebels will not last the night.”

Chapter Nine:

Five Again

Aestar was having the time of his life. This was the most excitement he or any of his men had ever had. The Caukast had lost fewer than five men, while the ground was scattered with the numberless bodies of Tractus's soldiers.

Aestar was just aiming to shoot a soldier off one of the inner walls when a loud scream flew across the courtyard and a Caukast body was hurled out of a window in the inner tower. A minute later, the door to the inner courtyard slammed open, revealing a tall, fierce, foreboding figure, dressed in black and red and brown, with the symbol of Durneth emblazoned on his helmet.

As if a sudden rage had come upon him, the figure began swinging madly at any and all outlaws that came in his way. The Caukast readily challenged him at first, but very soon began to avoid rather than confront him. It made no difference — he began to chase them down.

Aestar stood awed by this monster who, it seemed, nothing could stand before. He watched as the raw power and rage wildly knocked his men to the ground with an almost unnatural curiosity. So enraptured was he by

this display that he failed to notice when the figure was standing directly before him with an upraised sword until it was almost too late. He raised his own weapon in a feeble attempt to defend himself. It was knocked out of his hand and he was thrown to the ground from the shock of the blow. Staring up, Aestar found himself face to mask with Tractus, king of Denethen Taur, lord of Durneth, and self-proclaimed lord over Othaty and all the Northern Kingdom.

Yarhim's troops were still lounging lazily about. Some had even begun to set up camp, starting fires or building makeshift shelters. Yarhim's previous attempt to rouse them to action had done no good. He decided to make another try.

“Men of Powerdom,” he implored, “Our kingdom as we know it is under the attack of Tractus and his forces. They have made our women and children the North captive to his new rule of tyranny. This is our last chance to rescue these fair lands from destruction at the hand of a monster. Our one chance to redeem our fair kingdom from the horror that could and will surely befall us if we do not press on! Lying here to rest may offer temporary strength, but what good will strength do us if we are slaughtered? We must move to attack tonight!”

The grumbling began to change to a mumbling, and then to a murmur. They were beginning to listen.

Aestar's face filled with panic as the king of Denethen Taur brought his sword heavily down on him. The boy rolled quickly out of the way, barely completing a half-roll before the blade hit the stone pavement with a clang. With a roar, Tractus swung his sword sideways from the ground, hitting Aestar in the head with the broadside and sending the boy flying. Gaining his balance and control of his sword again, Tractus stalked after the boy.

Aestar landed with a crunch on the hard courtyard floor. Looking around for his sword, he spotted it about 15 feet away. He could make it, he told himself. He tried to bring himself up to a crawling position, but a sharp pain shot through his right arm. It was broken. He began to pull himself along the ground with his left hand, measuring the distance between him and his sword. Ten feet. Then seven. Five feet. Four. Three.

A heavy boot drove into his side, stopping his movement and turning him over onto his back. The boot found a place on his chest and began to press, squeezing air and valor and courage out of his body. This time, there was no escape.

Men left their makeshift campsites and getting into formation to march again. Yarhim, smiling weakly, stepped down from the rock and ran to the new lines to lead his troops to war again. Everything was in order in

no more than five minutes, and they were off again, marching at a steady pace through the woods.

They went on for many long hours, over branches and through trees and bushes. The grueling work wore at their bodies for many an hour, making some men stop and others push on harder. Finally, they arrived at the woods surrounding Othaty. Stepping out onto one of the village streets, Yarhim broke into a run. His troops quickly followed suit. A sentry blew a warning horn, a note which filled all of the southern army with dread.

Tractus threw his sword from his right hand to his left hand and then back again. A crooked smile was forming on his lips, though Aestar couldn't see it behind the dark lord's masked helmet. Tractus spun the blade in his hand, letting it point down at the prince's chest. He raised it to begin the descent.

Suddenly, the blast of a horn echoed across the stone of the courtyard. Startled, Tractus turned to the open gate looking for some sign of an oncoming force headed for his castle. This was all Aestar needed.

Pushing off with his feet the best he could, he lunged for the handle of his sword. Tractus's boot slid off of Aestar's chest, throwing the ruler off his balance. The fingers of Aestar's left hand closed around the hilt of the sword, and he madly swung it around at the boot that had been holding him pinned to the ground only seconds before. The blade met with and parted the

thick leather covering and dug deep into the dark one's heel.

Tractus yelled. A yell of agony, most thought. Enraged, he turned around, sword in hand, to finish off this human that had, for so long, stood in his way to ultimate power and conquest.

At that moment, he died.

At that moment, an arrow pierced the one spot on the back of his head that had no armor protecting it. The spot was about the size of a quarter.

The great black hulk fell slowly to his side, sword dropping and cape spattered with blood. He hit the ground with an ominous thud.

Aestar leapt up. "Jaclin!" he called, getting the man's attention. "The window! In the inner tower! Make sure it holds the flag of Powerdom!" The general ran off to fulfill the task given him by his prince. Aestar took one step forward. Darkness overcame him, and he collapsed in the midst of a raging battle.

Yarhim ran for all he was worth through the streets of Othaty, followed closely by his troops. The warning horn continued to sound, and the King of Powerdom hoped that the king of Denethen Taur would not have time to prepare any kind of a defense before they arrived.

As they rounded a corner and came within full view of the castle, the entire army stopped suddenly in their tracks. If you had seen what they had,

and under the same conditions, I have no doubt that you would have done the same. All stood, silent, awestruck, and dumbfounded at the scene that awaited them. It was one they would never forget.

The drawbridge was down. Tortured screams and noises of confusion and chaos climbed over the castle walls. The standard of Powerdom hung from a window in the inner tower. Cries of, “Aestar! Aestar!” and, “The King’s son! For the Prince who has returned!” reached the King’s ears.

Tears collected in the old man’s eyes, although he knew not why. Lifting his sword from the ground, he let loose a cry that would stay in the hearts of his people ever after. The forces of Powerdom went forth to wash away all that was left of evil from the land.

Aestar groggily opened his eyes. The noise had stopped, and now only the faint murmuring of voices could be heard. Pushing himself up to a sitting and then a kneeling position with his left hand, he struggled to peer through the fog that still clouded his eyes. A figure was approaching him, though he knew not who it was.

“Aestar?” it said, kneeling beside him and taking his shoulders in his hands. “Is that you?”

He knew that voice...

“Father?” Aestar croaked wonderingly.

“Aestar!” Yarhim shouted with joy. “You are alive! Oh, thank God!”

Father and son embraced each other as they never could have before. They had been separated for seven years. Today was the eve of his fifteenth birthday.

Chapter Ten:

Histories

So ends the story of Aestar, son of Yarhim and Lahoyen, lost in the year 1140 and found again in the year 1147. The details of what occurred following the recently accounted battle are long and boring, but, for those of you who may perchance want to hear them, I shall tell them to you now.

After the loss of their king, the residents of Denethen Taur under the fortress of Durneth, being no longer governed by the iron fists of Tractus, left their homes in the Northern Mountains. Some journeyed southwards and lived the rest of their lives in Powerdom under the rule of King Yarhim and, later, that of Aestar and Ethella, who got married three years after the Battle at Othaty. Some of the people of Denethen Taur wandered north into the Wild Lands and settled there. They were never heard from again in Powerdom, and do not enter into the tales south of the Northern Mountains.

Detracur is supposed to have gone with these wanderers after the fall of Durneth, for he was never heard from again. His descendants are said to have returned to Powerdom many years later, but they do not come into this tale and will not be mentioned hereafter.

The Caukast suffered an interesting fate, and one well worth

recording. Masha and his father were granted full pardon for their illegal doings and allowed to take up residence in Powerdom, free from the typical punishments and stigmas of outlawry. They accepted this privilege, and Aestar allowed them to live as one of the royal courtiers, which they did until their dying days. However, as for the rest of the Caukast tribe, Yarhim disavowed all knowledge of their existence and allowed them to live as they had, outlaws and outcasts, without further interruptions of their lifestyle. This they did with little complaining, and, for all anyone knows, they are living there still.

As mentioned before, Aestar and Ethella were married and, together with Yarhim, chose a new ruler for the Northern Kingdom after Toolput. His name was Renais, and he did a well enough job for his time. King Yarhim, Aestar's father, lived out his days in proper fullness and died of old age in his own bed. Not a valiant death, perhaps, but a peaceful one.

After the Battle at Othaty, two things still remained mysteries for the people of Powerdom. Who kidnapped Aestar? and Who killed Tractus? Many still suspected Detracur of the first, but, according to King Yarhim, he had been taking a vacation in Swarduff at the time of the disappearance, so he was nowhere near Basohm. Tractus' death is possibly the more puzzling case. None of the Caukast tribe would admit to intentionally killing the king of Denethen Taur, or even firing off an arrow around the time of his death. They claimed that it had been too harried of a battle at that time to use the

bow and arrow, and they were right. Still, it is an odd thing for no one to claim such a mighty feat as that one, and I believe that is has stayed that way ever since.

On his deathbed, Yarhim gave his only son a special blessing, one saying that, under his hand, the land would prosper and grow abundantly, and it did. King Aestar and Queen Ethella ruled and prospered and died happily together many years and many children later. I wish that I could say that they lived completely happily ever after, and I could, save for one event that happened many years later, just before the ending of their reign.

But that, my friends, like so many other things in this world are, is another story.

THE END