

A Darkness At Sethanon

Raymond E. Feist

Book 3 of the Riftwar Saga

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Raymond E. Feist San Diego, California

Synopsis: Our Story So Far ...

After the Riftwar against the Tsurani, alien invaders from the world of Kelewan, peace reigned in the Kingdom of the Isles for nearly a year. King Lyam and his brothers, Prince Arutha and Duke Martin, toured the eastern cities and neighbouring kingdoms, then returned to Lyam's capital at Rillanon. The Princess Carline, their sister, gave an ultimatum to her lover, Laurie the minstrel: wed her or leave the palace. Arutha and Princess Anita became engaged, and plans were made for their wedding in Krondor, Arutha's city.

When Arutha finally returned to Krondor, late one night, Jimmy the Hand, a boy thief, stumbled across and foiled a Nighthawk, an assassin, whose target was Arutha. It was a standing order among the Mockers that all news of the Nighthawks be reported at once. Jimmy became confused about where his loyalty lay, with the Mockers -the Guild of Thieves – or with Arutha, whom he had known the year before. Before he could decide, Jimmy was set up for murder by Laughing Jack, an officer in the Mockers, proof Jack was in league with the Nighthawks. During the ambush, Jimmy was wounded and Laughing Jack killed. Jimmy then decided to warn Arutha.

Warned of the plot, Arutha, Laurie and Jimmy trapped two assassins and imprisoned them in the palace. Arutha discovered the Nighthawks were somehow connected to the temple of the Death Goddess, Lims-Kragma. He ordered the High Priestess to attend him, but by the time she arrived one of the assassins had died and the other was dying. She sought to discover how her temple had been infiltrated by the Nighthawks. Upon dying, one of the captured Nighthawks was revealed as a magically disguised moredhel, a dark elf. The now dead creature rose up, called upon his master, Murmandamus, and attacked the High Priestess and Arutha. Only the magic intervention of Arutha's adviser Father Nathan balked the otherwise unkillable creature.

When the High Priestess and Father Nathan recovered from their ordeal, they warned Arutha that dark and alien powers sought his death. Arutha was troubled over the safety of his brother the King and the others who would be attending Arutha's forthcoming wedding, especially his beloved Anita. Deciding upon a quick solution rather than further magic investigation, Arutha empowered Jimmy to arrange a meeting for him with the Upright Man, the mysterious head of the Mockers.

In darkness, Arutha met one who claimed to speak with the voice of the Upright Man, though it was never made clear to the Prince if the speaker was himself the leader of the thieves. They came to an understanding on the need to rid the city of the Nighthawks and, in the bargain, Jimmy was given into Arutha's service as a squire of the Prince's court. Jimmy had broken oath with the Mockers and his career as a thief was over.

Later the Upright Man sent word of the location of the Nighthawks. Arutha and a company of trusted soldiers raided the Nighthawks' headquarters, the basement of the most expensive brothel in the city. Every assassin was killed or committed suicide. The finding of the body of Golden Dase, a thief and false friend to Jimmy, revealed that the Nighthawks had indeed infiltrated the Mockers. Then the dead assassins rose up, again by some dark power, and only by burning the entire building were they destroyed.

At the palace, Arutha decided the immediate danger was over, and life returned to a semblance of normalcy.

The King, the Ambassador from Great Kesh, and other dignitaries arrived at the palace, and Jimmy caught a glimpse of Laughing Jack in the crowd. Jimmy was shocked, for he had been certain the false thief had died.

Arutha alerted his most trusted advisers of the danger and learned strange things were occurring in the north. It was decided there was a connection between those events and the assassins. Jimmy arrived with the news that the palace was honeycombed with secret passages and his fear that he had seen Jack. Arutha decided upon a course of caution, taking care to guard the palace, but determined to proceed with the wedding.

The wedding became a gathering point for all those who had been separated since the Riftwar: in addition to the royal party, Pug the magician came from Stardock, site of the Academy of Magicians. He was a onetime resident of Crydee, home to the King and his family. Kulgan, his old teacher, attended along with Vandros, Duke of Yabon, and Kasumi, the former Tsurani commander, now Earl of LaMut. With King Lyam came Father Tully, another of Arutha's boyhood teachers, now an adviser to the King.

Just before the wedding, Jimmy discovered that a window had been tampered with and Laughing Jack was secreted in a cupola overlooking the hall. Jack overpowered the boy and bound him. When the wedding started, Jimmy managed to foil Jack's attempt at killing Arutha by wiggling forward and kicking Jack. They both fell, but were saved by Pug's magic. But after he had been cut loose, Jimmy discovered Jack's crossbow bolt had struck Anita.

After examining the wounded Anita, Father Nathan, in conference with Father Tully, announced that the bolt had been poisoned and the Princess was dying. Jack was questioned and revealed the truth behind the Nighthawks. He had been saved from death by a strange power named Murmandamus, in return for attempting to kill Arutha.

All he knew of the poison was that it was called Silverthorn. With that he died. As Anita neared death, Kulgan the magician remembered that a large library existed at the Ishapian abbey at Sarth, a town up the coast of the Bitter Sea. Pug and Father Nathan used their magic to suspend Anita in time until a cure could be found.

Arutha vowed to travel to Sarth, and after an elaborate ruse to confuse possible spies, Arutha, Laurie, Jimmy, Martin and Gardan, Captain of the Prince's Royal Household Guard, journeyed north. In the forest south of Sarth, they were attacked by black-armoured moredhel riders, under the command of a moredhel recognized by Laurie as a chieftain from the Yabon mountain clans. Pursuing Arutha's party to the abbey at Sarth, the moredhel were repulsed by the magic of Brother Dominic, an Ishapian monk. The agents of Murmandamus attacked twice more at the Abbey, almost bringing about the death of Brother Micah, revealed to be the former Duke of Kronedor, Lord Dulanic. Father John, the Abbot, explained to Arutha that there was a prophecy regarding the return to power of the moredhel, once the 'Lord of the West' was dead. One of Murmandamus's agents had called Arutha that, so it seemed the moredhel believed that the prophecy might be approaching fruition. At Sarth, Arutha also discovered that 'Silverthorn' was a corruption of an elven word, so he decided to journey on to Elvandar and the court of the Elf Queen. Gardan and Dominic were ordered by Arutha and the Abbot to travel to Stardock, to carry the latest news to Pug and the other magicians there.

In Ylith, they encountered Roald, a mercenary and boyhood friend of Laurie, and Baru, a Hadati hillman from northern Yabon. Baru was seeking the strange moredhel chieftain, called Murad, wishing to avenge Murad's destruction of Baru's village. Both agreed to continue on with Arutha.

At Stardock, Dominic and Gardan were attacked by flying elemental creatures, servants of Murmandamus, and were saved by Pug. Dominic met the magician Kulgan and Katala, Pug's wife, as well as William, Pug's son, and Fantus the fire Drake. Pug listened to what they reported and asked the other magic users at Stardock for help. A blind seer, Rogen, had a vision of some dread power behind Murmandamus, which then attacked the old man across time and against probability, in defiance of all Pug understood of magic. A mute girl, Gamina, Rogen's ward, shared the vision, and her mental screaming overwhelmed Pug and his companions. Rogen survived the ordeal, and Gamina used her telepathic ability to recreate the vision for Pug and the others. They saw a city's destruction, and the terrible thing in the vision spoke in an ancient Tsurani tongue. Pug and the others who spoke the language were stunned at hearing this nearly forgotten temple language of Kelewan.

In Elvandar, Arutha and his company met the gwali, gentle apelike creatures who were visiting the elves. The elves told of strange encounters with moredhel trackers near the northern borders of the elven forests. Arutha explained his mission and was told of Silverthorn by Tathar, adviser to Queen Aglaranna and Tomas, the Prince Consort and inheritor of the ancient power of the Valheru – the Dragon Lords. Silverthorn grew in one place, on the shores of the Black Lake, Moraelin, a place of dark powers. Tathar warned Arutha that it would be a dangerous journey, but Arutha vowed to continue.

At Stardock, Pug determined that what menaced the Kingdom was of Tsurani origin. Somehow Kelewan and Midkemia again seemed to have their fates intertwined. The only possible source of knowledge about this threat would be the Assembly of Magicians upon Kelewan, thought to be forever closed off to them. Pug revealed to Kulgan and the others that he had found a means of returning to Kelewan. Over their objections, he decided to go back to see what he might do to gain knowledge. Once it was decided, both Meecham the forester, Kulgan's companion for years, and Dominic forced Pug to take them along. Pug established a rift between the two worlds and the three passed through. Back in the Empire of Tsuranuanni, Pug and his friends spoke first with Netoha, Pug's old estate manager, then with Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai, Kasumi's father. The Empire was in turmoil, on the verge of an open break between Warlord and Emperor, but Kamatsu vowed to carry Pug's warning of this alien terror to the High Council, for Pug was convinced that should Midkemia fall, Kelewan would follow. Pug was met by his old friend Hochopepa, a fellow magician, a Great One of the Empire. Hochopepa agreed to plead Pug's cause before the Assembly, for Pug had been named traitor to the Empire and was under sentence of death. But before he could depart, they were assaulted magically and captured by the Warlord's men.

Arutha and his party reached the Black Lake, Moraelin, avoiding a number of moredhel patrols and sentries. Galain the elf was sent by Tomas to carry news of another possible entrance to Moraelin. He told Arutha he would accompany them to the edge of the 'Tracks of the Hopeless', the canyon surrounding the plateau where Moraelin lay. Arutha and his company made their way to the Black Lake and discovered a strange black building, which they took to be a Valheru edifice. The search for Silverthorn was fruitless, and Arutha and the others spent the night in a cave below the surface of the plateau, where they decided they must enter the building.

Pug and his companions awoke in a cell and found their magic blocked by an enchantment. Pug was questioned by the Warlord and his two magician aides, the brothers Ergoran and Elgahar, about his purpose in returning to the Empire. The Warlord was convinced it had to do with political opposition to his plans to take control of the Empire from the Emperor. Neither he nor Ergoran believed Pug's story of a strange power of Tsurani

origin menacing Midkemia. Elgahar later came to Pug's cell to discuss the matter further, and said he would consider Pug's warning. Before he left, he whispered a speculation to Pug, which Pug agreed was possible. Hochopepa asked Pug what that speculation was, but Pug refused to discuss it. Later, Pug, Meecham, and Dominic were put to torture. After Dominic entered a trance to block the pain, and Meecham was rendered senseless, Pug was tortured. The pain and his resistance to the magic blocking his own caused Pug to succeed in using Magic of the Lesser Path, something thought impossible heretofore. He freed himself and his companions as the Emperor arrived with the Lord of the Shinzawai. The Warlord was executed for treason and Pug was granted permission to conduct research in the Assembly. Elgahar was instrumental in freeing Pug and, when asked why, revealed the speculation he shared with Pug. Both believed the Enemy, the ancient terror that drove the nations to Kelewan at the time of the Chaos Wars, had returned. At the Assembly, Pug discovered a reference to strange beings living in the polar ice, the Watchers. He parted company with his friends and left to seek the Watchers, while Hochopepa, Elgahar, Dominic and Meecham returned to Midkemia and the academy.

While hiding, Jimmy overheard some conversation between a moredhel and two human renegades, which gave him a clue something was not right about the black building. Jimmy convinced Arutha he should explore alone, as he was less likely to fall prey to any trap or ambush. Jimmy entered the strange black building and discovered what looked to be Silverthorn, but too many things about the place rang false. Jimmy returned to the cave with news that the building was one giant trap.

Further exploration revealed the cave to be part of a large underground Valheru abode, nearly unrecognizable after ages of erosion. Jimmy then determined that Silverthorn must be under water, as the elves had stated it grew close to the edge of the water and the rainfall that year had been heavy. That night they found the plant and began their flight. Jimmy was injured and the party slowed. They eluded the moredhel sentries but were forced to kill one, alerting Murad, who led the force set to capture Arutha. Near the edge of the elven forests, the exhausted party was forced to halt. Galain ran ahead, seeking his kinsmen Calin and the other elven warriors. The first band of moredhel overtook Arutha and was beaten back, but then Murad arrived with his larger force, including Black Slayers. Baru challenged Murad to single combat, and the strange honour code of the moredhel forced him to accept. Baru killed Murad, cutting his heart out to end the risk of his returning from the dead. Baru was cut down by a moredhel before he could return to his companions, and the battle was rejoined. As the Prince's party was nearly overwhelmed, the elves arrived and drove off the moredhel. Baru was found to be barely alive, and the elves carried the Prince and his party to the safety of Elvandar. The dead Black Slayers returned to life and pursued the elves to the edge of Elvandar, where Tomas arrived with the Spellweavers and destroyed the Black Slayers. At a celebration that night, Arutha learned that Baru would live after a long convalescence. Arutha and Martin considered the end of their quest, both knowing the battle was only a part of a larger conflict, whose final outcome had not been decided.

Pug reached the northern edges of the Empire and, leaving his Tsurani guards, set off across the Thun-held tundra. The strange centaur-like creatures, who called themselves the Lasura, sent an old warrior to converse with Pug. The creature revealed the existence of dwellers in the ice and ran off declaring Pug mad. Pug at last reached the glacier, where he was met by a cowled being. The Watcher who greeted Pug took him down below the icecap to where a fabulous, magic forest existed. It was called Elvardein and was twin to Elvandar.

Pug discovered the Watchers to be elves, the long-vanished eldar, or elder elves. Pug was to stay with them a year and learn arts beyond those he already had at his command.

Arutha reached Krondor safely with the cure for Anita. She was revived, and plans were made to finish the wedding. Carline insisted Laurie and she also get married at once, and for the time being, the palace at Krondor was the scene of joy and happiness.

Peace returned to the Kingdom of the Isles, for almost a year

BOOK IV: Macros Redux

*Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
In a strange city.*

Poe, *The City in the Sea*, st. 1

Prologue: Darkwind

The wind came from nowhere.

Ringling into existence with the reverberation of a hammer striking doom, it carried the heat of a forge that fashioned hot war and searing death. It came into being in the heart of a lost land, emerging from some strange place between that which is and that which seeks to be. It blew from the south, when snakes walked upright and spoke ancient words. Angry, it stank of ancient evil, echoing with long forgotten prophecies. In a frenzy the wind spun, swirling out of the void, as if seeking a course, then it seemed to pause, then it blew northward.

The old nurse hummed a simple tune, one handed down from mother to daughter for generations, while she sewed. She paused to glance up from her needlework. Her two small charges lay sleeping, tiny faces serene while they dreamed their tiny dreams. Occasionally fingers would flex or lips would purse in sucking motions, then one or the other would return to quiescence. They were beautiful babies and would grow to be handsome lads, of this the nurse was certain. As men they would have only vague memories of the woman who sat with them this night, but for now they belonged as much to her as their mother, who sat with her husband presiding over a state dinner. Then through the window a strange wind came, chilling her despite its heat. It carried a hint of alien and distorted dissonance in its sound, an evil tune barely perceived. The nurse shivered and looked toward the boys. They became restless, as if ready to wake crying. The nurse hurried to the window and closed the shutters, blocking out the strange and disquieting night air. For a moment it seemed all time held its breath, then, as if with a slight sigh, the breeze died away and the night was calm again. The nurse tightened her shawl about her shoulders and the babies stirred fitfully for another moment, before lapsing into a deep and quiet sleep.

In another room nearby, a young man worked over a list, struggling to put aside personal likes and dislikes as he decided who was to serve at a minor function the next day. It was a task he hated, but he did it well. Then the wind made the window curtains blow inward. Without thinking, the youngster was half out of his chair in a crouch, a dirk seeming to fly from his boot top to his hand, as a street-born sense of wariness signalled danger. Poised to fight, he stood with heart pounding for a long moment, as certain of a death struggle as he had ever been in his conflict-torn life. Seeing no one there, the young man slowly relaxed.

The moment was lost. He shook his head in perplexity. An odd disquiet settled in the pit of his stomach as he slowly crossed to the window. For long, slowly passing minutes he gazed toward the north, into the night, where he knew the great mountains lay, and beyond, where an enemy of dark aspect waited. The young man's eyes narrowed as he stared into the gloom, as if seeking to catch a glimpse of some danger lurking out there. Then as the last of the rage and fear fled, he returned to his task. But throughout the balance of the night he occasionally turned to look out the window.

Out in the city a group of revellers made their way through the streets, seeking another inn and more merry companions. The wind blew past them and they halted a moment, exchanging glances. One, a seasoned mercenary, began to walk again, then halted, considering something. With a sudden loss of interest in celebration, he bade his companions good night and returned to the palace where he had guested for almost a year.

The wind blew out to sea where a ship raced toward its home port after a long patrol. The captain, a tall old man with a scarred face and a white eye, paused as he was touched by the freshening wind. He was about to call for the sheets to be shortened when a strange chill passed through him. He looked over to his first mate, a pock-faced man who had been at his side for years. They exchanged glances, then the wind passed. The captain paused, gave the order to send men aloft, and, after another silent moment, shouted for extra lanterns to be lit against the suddenly oppressive gloom.

Farther to the north, the wind blew through the streets of a city, creating angry little dust swirls that danced a mad caper across the cobbles, skittering along like demented jesters. Within this city men from another world lived beside men born there. In the soldiers' commons of the garrison, a man from that other world wrestled one raised within a mile of where the match was taking place, with heavy wagering among those who watched. Each man had taken one fall and the third would decide the winner. The wind suddenly struck and the two opponents paused, looking about. Dust stung eyes and several seasoned veterans suppressed shudders. Without words the two opponents quit the match, and those who had placed wagers picked up their bets without protest. Silently those in the commons returned to their quarters, the festive mood of the contest having fled before the bitter wind.

* * *

The wind swept northward until it struck a forest where little apelike beings, gentle and shy, huddled in the branches, seeking a warmth that only close physical contact can provide. Below, on the floor of the forest, a man sat in meditative pose. His legs were crossed and he rested the backs of his wrists upon his knees, thumbs and forefingers forming circles that represent the Wheel of Life to which all creatures are bound. His eyes snapped open at the first caress of the darkling wind and he regarded the being who sat facing him. An old elf, showing but the faint signs of age native to his race, contemplated the human for a moment, seeing the unspoken question. He nodded his head slightly. The human picked up the two weapons that lay at his side. The long sword and half-sword he placed in his belt sash, and with only a gesture of farewell he was off, moving through the trees of the forest as he began his journey to the sea. There he would seek out another man, one who was also counted

friend to the elves, and prepare for the final confrontation that would soon begin. As the warrior made his way toward the ocean the leaves rustled in the branches over his head.

In another forest, leaves also trembled, in sympathy with those troubled by the passing darkwind. Across an enormous gulf of stars, around a greenish yellow sun spun a hot planet. Upon that world, below the cap of ice at the north pole, lay a forest twin to that left behind by the travelling warrior. Deep within that second forest sat a circle of beings steeped in timeless lore. They wove magic. A soft, warm glow of light formed a sphere about them, as each sat upon the bare earth, richly coloured robes unblemished by stain of soil. All eyes were closed, but each saw what he or she needed to see. One, ancient beyond the memory of the others, sat above the circle, suspended in the air by the strength of the spell they all wove together. His white hair hung below his shoulders, held back by a simple wire of copper set with a single jade stone upon his forehead. His palms were held up and forward, and his eyes were fixed upon another, a black-robed human, who floated opposite him. That other rode the currents of arcane energy forming a matrix about him, sending his consciousness along those lines, mastering this alien magic. The black-robed one sat in mirror pose, his hands held palm out, but his eyes were closed as he learned. He mentally caressed the fabric of this ancient elven sorcery and felt the intertwined energies of every living thing in this forest, taken and lightly turned, never forced, toward the needs of the community. Thus the Spellweavers used their powers: gently, but persistently, spinning the fibre of these ever present natural energies into a thread of magic that could be used. He touched the magic with his mind and he knew. He knew his powers were growing beyond human understanding, becoming godlike in comparison to what he had once thought were the limits of his talents. He had mastered much in the passing year, yet he knew there was much more to learn. Still, with his tutoring he now had the means to find other sources of knowledge. The secrets known to few but the greatest masters – to pass between worlds by strength of will, to move through time, and even to cheat death – he now understood were possible. And with that understanding, he knew he would someday discover the means of mastering those secrets. If he was granted enough time. And time was at a premium. The leaves of the trees echoed the rustle of the distant darkwind. The man in black set dark eyes upon the ancient being floating before him, as both withdrew their minds from the matrix. Speaking by strength of mind, the man in black said, *So soon, Acaila?*

The other smiled, and pale blue eyes shone forth with a light of their own, a light which when first seen had startled the man in black. Now he knew that light came from a deep power beyond any he had known in any mortal save one. But this was a different power, not the astonishing might of that other but the soothing, healing power of life, love, and serenity. This being was truly one with all around him. To gaze into the glowing eyes was to be made whole, and his smile was a comfort to see. But the thoughts that crossed the distance between the two as they gently floated earthward were troubled. Then with a texture of thought the black-robed man had come to understand was humour, he added aloud, “But ready or unready, it is time.”

The others rose as one and for a silent moment the black-clad one felt their minds join with his, in a final farewell. They were sending him back to where a struggle was under way, a struggle in which he was to play a vital part. But they were sending him with much more than he had possessed when he had come to them. He felt the last contact, and said, “Thank you. I will return to where I can travel quickly home.” Without further words he closed his eyes and vanished. Those in the circle were silent a moment, then each turned to undertake whatever

task awaited him or her. In the branches the leaves remained restless and the echo of the darkwind was slow in fading.

The darkwind blew until it reached a ridge trail above a distant vale, where a band of men crouched in hiding. For a brief moment they faced the south, as if seeking the source of this oddly disquieting wind, then they returned to observing the plains below. The two closest to the edge had ridden long and hard in response to a report by an out-riding patrol. Below, an army gathered under banners of ill-aspect. The leader, a greying tall man with a black patch over his right eye hunkered down below the ridge. "It's as bad as we feared," he said in hushed tones.

The other man, not as tall but stouter, scratched at a grey-shot black beard as he squatted beside his companion. "No, it's worse," he whispered. "By the number of campfires, there's one hell of a storm brewing down there."

The man with the eye-patch sat silently for a long moment, then said, "Well, we've somehow gained a year. I expected them to hit us last summer. It is well we prepared, for now they'll surely come." He moved in a crouch as he returned to where a tall, blond man held his horse. "Are you coming?"

The second man said, "No, I think I'll watch for a while. By seeing how many arrive and at what rate, I may hazard a good guess at how many he's bringing."

The first man mounted. The blond man said, "What matter? When he comes, he'll bring all he has."

"I just don't like surprises, I suppose."

"How long?" asked the leader.

"Two, three days at most, then it will get too crowded hereabouts."

"They're certain to have patrols out. Two days at the most." With a grim smile, he said, "You're not much as company goes, but after two years I've grown used to having you around. Be careful."

The second man flashed a broad grin. "That cuts two ways. You've stung them enough for the last two years they'd love to throw a net over you. It wouldn't do to have them show up at the city gates with your head on a battle pike."

The blond man said, "That will not happen." His open smile was in contrast to his tone, one of determination the other two knew well.

"Well, just see it doesn't. Now, get along."

The company moved out, with one rider staying behind to accompany the stout man in his watch. After a long minute of observing he muttered softly, "What are you up to this time, you misbegotten son of a motherless whoremonger? Just what are you going to throw at us this summer, Murmandamus?"

ONE: Festival

Jimmy raced down the hall.

The last few months had been a time of growth for Jimmy. He would be counted sixteen years old the next Midsummer's Day, though no one knew his real age. Sixteen seemed a likely guess, although he might be closer to seventeen or even eighteen years old. Always athletic, he had begun to broaden in the shoulders and had gained nearly a head of height since coming to court. He now looked more the man than the boy.

But some things never changed, and Jimmy's sense of responsibility remained one of them. While he could be counted upon for important tasks, his disregard of the trivial once