

# THE FIREWORKER

by Ben Jeapes

*Originally published in Altair, issue 1*

---

The fire was not one of Cegario's best but it had been made by more conventional means than he was used to and he did not dare make it any brighter. He pulled his cloak closer around him and concentrated on feeling warm. Every now and again he looked up, but beyond the orange light the trees were a black wall. He shivered again and waited. The horse tethered across the clearing snorted.

He heard the movement behind him: for the last couple of minutes he had been tracking its progress as it moved slowly around the fire, while staying in the dark. A hand touched his shoulder.

'Sit down,' he said impatiently.

'You were meant to jump,' said the hand's owner. Shan, a painfully thin blond boy, was older than his height gave him credit for, but as far as Cegario was concerned he had a lot of maturing to do, starting with his sense of humour.

'You're as subtle as a rutting bear,' Cegario said. Shan shrugged and sat down, holding out his hands to the flames.

'Phew! Call this a fire?' He rubbed his hands together, then held them out again. Cegario held out a hand toward him; the boy shrugged again and passed over a small pouch.

'What about the town?' Cegario growled. He took a far larger leather bag out from under his cloak and carefully poured in the contents of the pouch – small crystals that sparkled gold in the fire light. A thrill ran through his mind, as though he had just been reunited with an old and dear friend. That was how the crystals felt about him.

He performed the task with care for this was his sole supply and though there was a man in the High Republic who could have provided him with more, that same man had been sorely aggrieved by the loss of the crystals in the first place. This was one reason why, wherever he was (even if it was sitting and shivering in a glade in a forest in the Principality of Laranala), Cegario tried to be always a few days' journey from the ever-expanding territory of the High Republic. Now the High Republic was on the move again and had reached the western border of Laranala, and for the last few days he and Shan had been heading for the border to the east.

'Eh? Oh, yeah, the town.' He wasn't much good in forests, but put Shan amongst buildings and he could have been invisible. It was his greatest asset. 'Small little concern, name of Dound. Less'n a town, more'n a village, if you follow.'

'Sounding good.'

‘Sure. And it was dip ... deppo ...’

‘Depopulated?’

‘That, by the war, like you said. Just peasants and a mayor, really. Country folk.’ Shan added the last description with all the scorn of a true city-bred urchin.

‘Magicians?’

‘Not even a palm reader,’ Shan said smugly.

A slow grin spread across Cegario’s face. ‘And you planted the crystals?’ He jiggled the bag.

‘Market square.’

‘It’s looking like a warm bath and bed tomorrow night, m’boy.’

‘Yup,’ Shan agreed.

\* \* \*

The pair who entered Dound were very different to the pair who had camped half a mile away the night before. Instead of their usual travelling garb they wore smart clothes which spent most of their time carefully folded in Cegario’s saddle bags. He usually wanted to travel quietly and unnoticed, which the vivid reds and oranges of his present attire precluded.

People in the square stopped to look as the two arrived; obviously a man of some nobility astride his mount, with his page boy on foot leading the horse.

The two headed for the nearest inhabitant, who stood and frankly gawped.

‘My master, Dr Cegarius, asks where we may obtain hos ... host ... a roof and food,’ Shan said. Above him, Cegario stared into the distance.

‘An inn?’ the man said.

‘S’what I meant,’ Shan said.

‘That building there, young master,’ the man said, pointing. ‘Davo Tallen will put you up.’ Shan swelled visibly at being called ‘young master’ and Cegario continued to ignore them.

‘Thank you, good man. This way, sire.’ Shan led the horse over to the inn.

‘The crystals?’ Cegario murmured, his lips not moving.

‘There, by those steps,’ Shan replied in kind.

Dound was looking promising.

\* \* \*

Word soon spread around that someone grand had turned up in Dound and was lodging with the Tallens. Shan had, at a nod from Cegario, produced a bulging bag, delved thoughtfully about in it and eventually extracted a large gold piece that would have bought them a month’s accommodation in a far grander establishment. The

implication was clearly that the bag held many more coins of the type, not just pieces of iron that gave their weight and shape and nothing else to the illusion.

‘Must be half an hour by now,’ Shan muttered in disgust, once they had settled into their room. ‘Maybe we should announce ourselves.’

‘Give them time,’ Cegario said. ‘They’re nervous.’

‘Bumpkins.’

Snotty brat, Cegario thought. Shan was useful, but theirs was a partnership, never a friendship. Cegario had put up with it for three years now in their wanderings. His dream was that Shan would soon be old enough to get a girl pregnant – even if Cegario had to procure her himself – and be forced to settle down. The noble Dr Cegarius, outraged by his apprentice’s shameful conduct, would publicly dismiss him from his service and that would be that. One day.

Someone was coming up the stairs. More than one person.

‘Bout time,’ Shan murmured as the visitors knocked politely on the door. Cegario stayed in his chair and opened a large book somewhere in the middle. He kept his eyes firmly on the page as Shan opened the door.

Two men stood outside. One, a middle aged fellow, had a cap and was actually twisting it in his hands. Cegario, whose peripheral vision was excellent, noticed that the other, a tall and muscular man of a similar age, was looking at Shan in a thoughtful way that Shan plainly didn’t like. Fortunately it was the cap-twister who spoke.

‘Ah ... greetings, ah ... young sir.’ The man spoke to the boy but was pointedly looking over Shan’s head at Cegario.

‘How might my master, Dr Cegarius, help you?’ Shan asked.

‘I am Lee Shercek,’ the man said, ‘the mayor of Dound. This is Pawl Drinil, our blacksmith and my deputy. I wonder if your master would care to lunch with me? My home is the tiled building across the square and I offer hospitality far more in keeping with your master’s station.’

Which was convenient: Shan had identified that building as the most important in the town and it was outside that building that he had planted a pinch of crystals.

‘Wait here.’ Shan went over to Cegario, knelt and repeated the request. The mayor and his companion fidgeted in the doorway as the charade ran its course. Cegario looked up from his book at the visitors, then at Shan; he nodded once and returned to his reading. Shan stood up again.

‘We will be there at noon,’ Shan translated.

\* \* \*

The company at lunch was Mr Shercek and his wife, Mr Drinil and his wife, and a couple of other worthies of Dound. Shan was bundled off to the kitchen to eat with

the servants, to Cegario's relief. Keeping up the appearance of aloofness was strain enough without the added irritation of Shan's over-acting.

Shan's analysis of Dound the previous evening seemed to be quite accurate. A village on the outskirts of the Principality, miles from anywhere, full of credulous country folk. Only a couple of those who sat around the table had even visited the capital, but the visit seemed to have reinforced the idea that folk from the city were by their very nature grander and wiser than folk from a place like Dound.

Mr Drinil, the blacksmith, on the other hand, had been a sergeant in the army, invalided out before the war; he had taken a bad fall from a horse and still walked with a limp. But he had seen more of the world than just the capital: he had even gone outside the Principality. He was the best travelled of all the townsfolk and he made Cegario uneasy.

'But, Dr Cegarius, may we humbly ask as to your business in our poor village?' Shercek finally asked. At last!

Cegario took a sip of wine before answering.

'My business, Mr Shercek, is fire,' he said, endowing the simple statement with such meaning that the others were impressed despite themselves.

'... ah?' Shercek said.

'I work with fire. I travel through the kingdoms with my acolyte, bringing the secrets of fire to those who have not been initiated.' Cegario wondered who would make the usual, obvious reply. No, on second thoughts, he could guess.

'Dr Cegarius, we have fire, even in Dound.' Drinil, the former soldier, spoke with a tone that was nine-tenths respectful. 'I use it every day.'

Cegario deigned to nod.

'Everywhere has fire, Mr Drinil,' he agreed kindly, 'and I do not doubt that it is a most useful feature of your smithy. But do you know the secrets of fire? Fire, gentlemen, is a window between worlds. Have you never looked into the flames and felt the other world calling out to you?' Cegario held Drinil's gaze and leaned forward ever so slightly. He was conscious of the full attention of everyone at the table. 'Within fire, the enquiring and perceptive mind will discover many strange things.'

Even Drinil looked thoughtful. Cegario had realised very early on that even quite unmagical people could stare into a good blaze and lose themselves in it, and he had traded on that fact ever since. Now, as silence followed his remark, Cegario looked around the table.

'But I am among sceptics,' he said sadly.

'No, no, Dr Cegarius,' Shercek said hastily, with a look at Drinil that was like a kick under the table. 'We have no doubts, but ... it is just that ...'

'Sceptics,' Cegario repeated. 'Even if you were to see, you would not believe ...'

\* \* \*

And, inevitably, they ended up out in the town square again. The news had spread around that the stranger was to do a demonstration and a remarkable number of casual passers-by were in the area. By the steps, Shan had said ... Cegario caught Shan in the corner of his eye and followed the boy's surreptitious hand signals which guided him to where Shan had planted the crystals the previous night. A few grains, invisible to the naked eye; that was all, and all that was needed.

Now that he was near, Cegario could feel the crystals, primed as they were for him and him alone. They sensed that he was close by and needed them and they started their usual clamour in his mind.

*Free us! Free us! Let us go!*

He held up his hands for silence, though the noise in his mind stayed.

'People of Dound!' he called. 'I am Dr Cegarius, the fireworker. My mission is to reach through the fire, between the worlds, and to bring knowledge to those who would have it. You think you have seen fire before?'

Cegario took a deep breath and tensed himself. This was like releasing a taut spring and in the same movement catching it before it had fully expanded.

'Behold, fire!'

He *thought* at the crystals in the special way and they heard him – with a cry of joy they returned to their natural state of flame. A column of fire blazed up in front of him, shot through with flickers of bright purple, green and gold. The townsfolk stepped back.

*Stop!* Cegario commanded, his hands held high in the air, and the crystals complained bitterly.

*You freed us! You said we could go!*

*In a moment.*

Cegario could see Shan grinning from ear to ear but he kept his own expression stern, despite the thrill that always went through him when the crystals responded to his commands.

'Come close, you who would have knowledge!' he cried. 'Behold, the gate between worlds is open!'

A shuffle, a murmur at the edge of the square ... a middle aged woman was coming forward. Cegario's heart sang. Would it be love, health, a bereavement ...?

A bereavement; he could see it in her eyes.

'You have lost a dear one, daughter,' he said gently. She nodded quickly.

'My son, sir, died as an infant-'

'His name?'

'I had no time to name him, sir.'

'Then your name?' Cegario asked patiently.

'Vanera, sir.'

'And how long ago did he die, Vanera?'

'Fifteen years, sir.'

Cegario turned back to the fire and thought quickly. Shan was too young and would be recognised ... but it had to be a real memory: products of his imagination as interpreted by the crystals were far too hazy. The first boy of fifteen to come to mind was a boy he had hated, a couple of years older than him ... he would be in his thirties, now, but the face of the youth who had tormented Cegario as a child in the palace kitchens was engrained on Cegario's mind forever. And the boy had been good-looking; very popular with the girls and just the type to warm a mother's heart.

*If you would be free, show me this*, he commanded and thought of the boy, at the same time crying, 'Son of Vanera, where are you?' For a moment – a brief moment – the face of a handsome young man appeared in the flames and Vanera gasped.

'Your son, Vanera,' Cegario said quietly. 'He has grown and prospered in the world beyond but he still remembers you with love, the woman who gave him his first life.'

*You promised! You promised!*

*Be free.*

In a final burst of exultation the crystals blazed whitely into extinction and the fire vanished.

Vanera's eyes flooded with tears and she gazed up in thankful awe at the gentle countenance of the fireworker. Dr Cegarius had begun his work in Dound.

\* \* \*

Drinil's smithy was black against the stars. A small shadow detached itself from the trees behind it and silently crossed the open ground to the building. Nothing more happened.

Some minutes later, the shadow crept around the edge of the building to the front and in through the door.

A flash of white in the shadow was Shan's teeth. The boy was grinning. He had had his eye on the smithy all the week that he and Cegario had been in Dound and he shared Cegario's dislike of the former soldier. But Cegario, Shan was certain, was actually frightened of Drinil and Shan would admit to being frightened of no one.

Between them they had long ago discovered that most people, even in places like Dound, had something secreted away as insurance against the future, and Shan's instinct for locating such hiding places was unmatched. He would visit the houses he had selected like a shadow in the middle of the night and the inhabitants would

awaken unknowingly slightly poorer. It was rare for them actually to check on their nest egg from day to day.

That was by night. By day, when Shan was too sleepy to be of use, Cegario did his own bit towards the impoverishment of Dound, making fire and giving the people who came to him what they wanted. He never charged for his services but gifts of gratitude came in regularly. He and Shan were now housed in an empty cottage all to themselves, for instance, and the separate rooms were a luxury that they both appreciated. Shan had even been persuaded, with the threat of a broken arm, to have a bath.

A man named Cault, a dour fogey who kept pigs, had been Shan's latest victim. Shan's instincts had told him that there was something worthwhile hidden behind the sty, just where Cault thought no one would think of looking. But Shan had thought of it. And now Mr Drinil ... Drinil had been dropping hints of spoils brought back from war for far too long and Shan intended to do something about it. Thieving was fun; thieving from people Shan disliked was best of all.

Now, where ...?

Silently he moved around the room, feeling here, probing there in the red glow of the smithy's fire.

Nothing. And yet he was sure ... he was sure...

The anvil was a dark, solid mass, tinged with red from the fire. Of course! Shan knelt down beside it and probed the earth floor with his fingers. Yup. The crafty old sod kept his loot underneath the anvil, where he was probably the only man in Dound strong enough to get at it. But there were ways.

Shan cast around for a suitable implement and began to scrape away at the floor besides the anvil. He would dig down, then across ...

An enormous hand wound its fingers into his hair and pulled him to his feet. Another hand with the strength of iron seized his wrist and bent it back behind him to touch his shoulder. Shan shrieked.

'Gotcha,' Drinil murmured into his ear.

\* \* \*

Cegario was hauled out of bed, literally, by the blacksmith's free hand: the other still held Shan by his hair. Shan's eyes were watering with the pain. As Drinil recited the facts of the case, Cegario began to hope. This was his chance-

'I didn't mean to get caught, boss,' Shan whined. Cegario looked at him through narrowed eyes. So, the brat had decided that if they were to go down, they would go down together.

There was still a chance of disowning the boy, but ...

'I want the truth about you two,' Drinil said. He pushed Shan over into one corner where the boy crouched down and rubbed his arm, glaring at them both like a

sullen trapped rat. Drinil backed into another corner, where he could see them both without having to switch his gaze from one to the other. ‘One little lie and ... well, just say Mr Shercek will believe my story over yours.’

Cegario never believed in fighting what was inevitable. Going along with it was a far better idea. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

‘Where should we start?’ he said.

‘For beginners, why does a man of your undoubted intelligence travel with this obnoxious little snot? Apart from the obvious answer, for which the penalty is castration, even in Dound.’

‘Huh,’ Shan mumbled and despite everything Cegario smiled.

‘There was a man took a fancy to him a couple of months back,’ Cegario said. ‘Shan has sharp knees and isn’t fussy about what he bites.’

Drinil looked thoughtfully at Shan. ‘So he’s a vicious obnoxious little snot.’ His gaze turned back to Cegario. ‘And you? What’s your game?’

‘We both irritated the same gentleman in the High Republic,’ Cegario said after a pause. ‘We felt it was time to leave and we ended up together.’

Drinil nodded. ‘I knew you were pulling some scam. I’ve seen too many holy men, real and otherwise, but I couldn’t tell what you were up to. That fire of yours – that’s real. How do you do it?’

So, Cegario told him all about the crystals. Almost all.

‘They were a toy, devised for a young Lady of the High Republic by ... by the gentleman we irritated, whose name it is wisest not to mention out loud.’ Drinil’s eyes widened; the implications were all too obvious. Even in Dound they had heard of him. Cegario went on, ‘The crystals become fire at the owner’s command, and if they can be held, they can be made to show images from the owner’s mind. It takes discipline and practice but anyone can do it.’

The crystals were fire elementals, captured and compressed into crystal form and once one human had got hold of them, that human stayed their master forever. But Cegario saw no reason to tell everything.

‘So how did you come by them?’ Drinil said.

‘I was a palace brat, from a long line of retainers. I worked my way up onto milady’s staff. I was bored with my position and ... well, I thought I could use the crystals to my own advantage.’

‘Very dangerous, crossing ... this gentleman like that.’

‘At the time I thought he was just another court magician. Everyone thought it.’ Cegario shrugged. ‘Then he began to flex his muscles and now I try to keep at least one country between him and us.’

Drinil nodded again. ‘And the snot?’ Shan glowered at him.

'He – his whole family – were in one of the High Republic's gangs,' Cegario said. 'The gentleman is not unconnected with the organisation of crime where we come from and Shan's chief failed to pay the gang's dues. I saw what happened to them.'

As had Shan; the boy had gone pale and was trembling. Drinil seemed impressed.

'How much have you lifted from Dound, snot?' Drinil asked.

'Dunno,' Shan mumbled. Drinil made a sudden move towards him.

'Bout twenty, thirty gold crowns and other bits'n'bobs,' Shan said quickly.

'Where?'

'Outside the town. I can show you, if-' [Shan suddenly turned ingratiating] '-you want a cut, sir.'

It was the wrong thing to say. Cegario shut his eyes and groaned silently; Drinil's jaw jutted and he spoke with a quiet, intense fury.

'Listen to me, you filth. Both of you. I don't want a cut. You're going to take me to where you've hidden your stuff and you're going to hand over everything you've taken. And then you're going to get out of Dound. I was going to hand you over to Mr Shercek and the townsfolk, but if you're in trouble with ...*him*, I just want you gone from here. Got that? And you leave now.'

\* \* \*

'It could have been worse,' Shan said hopefully, some hours later, as the horse trudged along the road away from Dound with its two passengers. It was the first thing he had dared say since they had parted with Drinil: the smith had scooped up the stolen riches and they had gone their separate ways.

Cegario rarely lost his temper on the spot. Instead he dwelt on what had upset him and let his anger build up inside him. He had been quietly furious with Shan since he had been woken and now it peaked.

'Shut up!' he shouted. He twisted round in his saddle and clouted Shan, hard enough to knock him off the horse. Shan wriggled in mid air but still landed, painfully, on his side. He writhed breathlessly, all the wind knocked out of him. Cegario dismounted and stood over him. Shan cowered.

'We were settling,' Cegario said. Now his voice was low and his expression murderous. He jabbed a finger at Shan. 'We were making a home. Dound had accepted us. We could have stayed there for a couple of months at least. But now? Do you think Drinil will keep quiet? He'll tell them all about us, and Shercek will feel it his duty to spread the word for miles around, and everyone will know that Dr Cegarius and Shan are nothing but a fraud and a thief!'

'Cegario-' Shan was still winded and could only wheeze the name.

'And every traveller who passes through Dound will be told, and in turn they'll tell everyone in every new town they come to, and before long the whole region will

have heard of us, we'll have to be on the road for weeks now to get well ahead of the gossip, and it's your fault!

'Boss-'

'*Shut up!*' Cegario bellowed. 'I'm just going to get back on the horse and leave you here to make your own way-'

'Look, please!' Shan wailed. There was open fear on the boy's face and Cegario finally realised it wasn't of him. Slowly he turned around.

From around the bend that lay just down the road a group of riders had appeared, trotting towards them with a characteristic brisk sense of purpose that he recognised.

'Cavalry,' he said. 'So what-'

A gust of wind unfurled the banner that one of them carried and, with horror, Cegario saw the emblem on it. The device of Laranala was intertwined with the swords of the High Republic.

'Oh, no,' he breathed.

How? The High Republic was behind them, to the west. How had it got ahead?

'We've got to run,' Shan whined.

'Why? We're innocent travellers, Shan. Don't say a word. And get up.'

The cavalry drew up to them: a group of thirty grim-looking men, guarding a train of wagons. The first few wagons held a crowd of sullen men and boys and the last two were empty.

Shan was standing by now and had dusted himself off. Cegario smiled ingratiatingly and went forward to greet the soldiers. He took great care to limp, as he had seen Drinil doing.

'Good day, good sirs.'

The lead soldier looked down at him. 'Are you a local?'

'I? Oh, no, sir, I am but a traveller, a singer.'

The sergeant looked at him, at Shan, at the horse, then back at Cegario. 'Where's your instrument?'

'My boy's pipes are in the bag,' Cegario said, mentally preparing a performance of *Outraged Traveller Whose Pipes Have Been Stolen* should the man actually want to look. He did have a good singing voice, which helped.

As it was, the next question was, 'Are we on the road to Dound?'

'Dound, sir? Why, yes, two hours in the direction you're going.'

The soldier nodded slowly, looking at Shan. 'Travel a lot, do you?' he said.

'Oh, yes, here, there and everywhere, sir,' Shan piped brightly.

*Ten seconds alone with him and a sharp knife, Cegario thought bitterly, to any god that might be listening. Please, it's all I need.*

The soldier was grinning. 'We're recruiting,' he explained, with a gesture at the wagons, 'but with that limp you'll be no good.' He looked thoughtfully down at Shan. 'How old are you, boy?'

'Nine, sir,' Shan lied, for once grateful for his size and unbroken voice.

The man nodded and looked back to Cegario. His words implied an option: his tone belied it. 'However, we could do with a guide to this area, if you would care to join us.'

\* \* \*

And so, Cegario and Shan found themselves heading back into Dound. People were up and about by now, and they looked warily at the newcomers. Those who recognised their accomplices looked confused, not sure what was going on.

The soldiers rode into the village square and waited while the sergeant strode up to the mayor's door. Shercek came out to meet them. Cegario and Shan had casually dismounted and were standing with the horse between them and the mayor. They heard the conversation: the sergeant brusque in his usual way and Shercek plainly frightened.

'Are you the mayor?'

'I am, sir.'

'Good. We are recruiting for our lord's campaign against Neress and will require your assistance.'

'I – I wasn't aware that our lord was at war with Neress, sir.'

'Ah.' They could hear the sergeant's grin. 'We are plainly not talking about the same our lord. The prince died in a tragic riding accident and a lord of the High Republic was invited to act as an impartial Regent until the matter of the succession could be sorted out. It is quite complicated.'

Shan groaned quietly. Cegario shushed him. So that was how it was. Under him, the High Republic controlled three states directly and its citizens could come and go as they pleased in two more. And now, without a fight, without a whisper, without even any warning, Laranala had been added to their repertoire.

'Tragic!' Shercek exclaimed. 'But we in Dound had not heard, sir, we have not had time to mourn adequately for-'

'No matter. Now, where can I billet my men?'

Shercek reluctantly gave directions to a field where tents could be pitched and the soldiers were ordered to remount. Cegario could delay it no longer: he had to get on the horse and Shan had to climb up behind him. Shercek saw them and his mouth dropped open. For want of anything better, Cegario winked and saw uncertainty cross

the mayor's face. Like the others, Shercek was wondering what was going on, but at the wink he held his peace. Clearly Drinil had not yet talked to him.

Then the command was given to ride on and the party headed off to the field.

\* \* \*

Drinil and Shercek came for them later that day. The soldiers had split up, leaving a hard core to guard the conscripts while the rest of them scouted around the area. Already a further fourteen males of various ages had been added to the wagon train. Cegario and Shan could do nothing but fret.

Cegario saw the two approaching and assumed that they were going to speak to the man in charge. To his surprise, Shercek quite clearly beckoned to him. He walked over to them uncomfortably; he had slipped a pebble into his shoe to help his limp lest he accidentally forgot it, or which foot it was meant to be. Shan, to Cegario's annoyance, trailed behind him. The four of them stood together with empty space around them – the best protection against eavesdroppers.

'The High Republic has caught up with you, Dr Cegarius,' Drinil said. Shercek was glaring at the former fireworker with the hurt of betrayed trust and the anger of realising he had been taken in. 'I told Shercek all about you,' Drinil added.

Cegario beamed pleasantly. 'You would have denounced me to the soldiers by now if you were ever going to,' he said. 'Now, smile, as if we were friends. They may be watching.'

'Do as-' Shan said.

'Shut up,' Cegario said, not taking his gaze from the two men. 'Well, what is it?'

Shercek spoke, his tone wavering from angry to pleading. 'Dr Cegarius, whatever your name is, Dound cannot afford to lose its men to the army. The harvest is coming. We lost enough men in the last war and we have just been able to make good. The few boys who were left to us have grown up and we need every one of them here.'

'Smile,' Cegario reminded him. Shercek did so, painfully.

'I am going to talk treason,' the mayor continued, 'but I have no reason to believe that the High Republic lord who now rules us deserves any loyalty from Dound.'

'He has a large army and the backing of the High Republic, which in turn is supported by the most powerful magician in the world, but apart from that, no, I see no reason to be loyal to him,' Cegario said.

'You are in no position to be flippant, Dr Cegarius,' Drinil said. 'I expect you still have those crystals, which belong to the gentleman you just mentioned.'

'Dr Cegarius, I doubt that the prince's accident was an accident,' Shercek said.

'Really?'

'I believe that the High Republic has committed war against us by murdering our lord. It is our right to fight against their soldiers. Can you use your crystals against

them? Lay a trap, perhaps, burn them? You know their properties better than I but there must be something you can do.'

'There had better be something you can do,' Drinil said, 'or in our disappointment we will be forced to denounce you.'

'If these soldiers are killed,' Cegario said, 'more will come.'

'By which time Dound will be empty!' Shercek said. 'It's twenty miles to the border and Neress. We will evacuate the village tonight and throw ourselves on the mercy of the Neressoi.'

Cegario thought it unlikely the Neressoi would be so generous, even if the entire village managed to get that far, but it was none of his concern. What was his concern was that these two just had to have a few words with the officer in charge and he and Shan would be walking corpses. Probably literally.

Cegario pondered. 'I will see,' he promised.

\* \* \*

By sunset, the soldiers were back in their camp and the evening watch was patrolling the borders of the field. Even in the daylight the sentry could not have seen the thin trail of crystals that ran all along one side of the field.

Cegario and Shan sat by their small natural fire.

'Sun's almost down,' Shan said. He was facing west.

'Tell me the moment it's down below the horizon.'

'Right-o.'

A few moments later, Shan said, 'Now.'

Cegario stood up and stretched casually, setting his mind to the crystal trail.

*Free us! Free us!*

*I will not hold you back. Burn, with my blessing.*

A sheet of fire twenty feet tall shot up along the camp's edge. Horses screamed and men shouted. Cegario waited until the confusion was at its peak and thought again, and with whoops of joy the clumps of crystals that Shan had planted here and there amidst the tents exploded into flame. No one had been able to tell the conscripts the plan but if they had any sense, now was the time to escape.

'Now,' Cegario said, swinging up onto the horse. He dug his feet in and the horse bolted, with Shan clinging onto it for dear life.

'Hang on! Trying to lose me?' he said, pulling himself up into the saddle behind Cegario.

*Bright lad*, Cegario thought. A soldier loomed up ahead in the flickering light, sword half-drawn.

'Oi! Get back to-'

Cegario rode him down.

A safe distance away, Cegario pulled the horse round and looked back the way they had come. The fires were still burning brightly and the soldiers should all have been concentrated into one spot by now, fighting against the fire. It was time for the final touch. A few crystals, a pinch, could produce that much flame and Shan had hidden a substantial pouch-full in the centre of the camp. Cegario *thought...*

He closed his eyes against the ball of pure white flame that erupted in the camp, immolating the tents, the soldiers, the horses ... Cegario heard the shouts turn to screams. He could dimly see the shapes of men, charred and scorched, staggering against the fire and burning brightly. He also saw the men of Dound rushing in, swords out, taking advantage of the confusion to dispatch the survivors. The screams died out, leaving just fire. He let the fire blaze until the crystals were consumed and the flames dwindled into nothing, leaving bright green scars scorched across his sight.

‘Hope they escaped,’ Shan murmured, thinking of the conscripts.

‘Their fault if they didn’t,’ said Cegario, whose main worry was for the crystals. His supply had been badly depleted.

They trotted down the main street of Dound into the square, which was packed. Old and young, men and women and children, were jostling about with as much of their worldly goods as they could carry.

‘Dr Cegarius!’ Shercek was standing on the steps of his residence.

‘Look, the fireworker!’ someone called. He was cheered and the crowd parted as he rode over to the mayor. Drinil was standing by him: they and the village elders had been trying to arrange some kind of order in the crowd prior to their escape to Neress.

Shercek grinned up at him. ‘Thank you, Dr Cegarius. We’re in your debt.’

*But don’t trade on it,* Drinil’s look plainly added. *Play your part.*

‘My pleasure, Mr Shercek,’ Cegario said loudly, as arranged. ‘The least I could do for all your kindness. And now I must leave you.’

There were cries from the crowd and entreaties to stay with them. Cegario held up a hand for silence. ‘No, I must continue my travels. But I can leave you something.’

This was a departure from the plot, though the people didn’t know it and they cheered. The smiles of the mayor and his deputy froze.

‘Here,’ Cegario said, ‘for your noble leaders.’ He threw two small pouches down to them; they caught them and stared up at him. Cegario drew the horse near and bent down to murmur for their hearing only.

‘They’re crystals,’ he confirmed, so quietly that not even Shan could hear. ‘They’re all I can spare, but I’ve treated them so that you can use them. Only you two, so don’t let anyone else get at them. Keep them to yourselves.’ He pressed a piece of

parchment into Shercek's hands. 'Here are instructions as to how to use them. Good luck!'

He turned to face Shan, looked the boy straight in the eyes and raised his voice once more. 'And I leave you with a final present, good folk. My apprentice, Shan!'

Shan's jaw dropped. He looked at Cegario, at Drinil and then back at Cegario, horror-struck amongst the cheers. Cegario grinned and clapped a friendly hand on the boy's shoulder.

'It's stay with them or get a knife between your ribs from me, brat,' he murmured, 'but either way, our partnership is dissolved.'

'Dr Cegarius.' Shercek spoke from by his knee. 'We couldn't possibly take your apprentice.'

'You could find uses for him.' Cegario turned back to look not at Shercek but at Drinil, holding the blacksmith's gaze.

Drinil nodded, slowly. He and Cegario understood each other. 'I think we could, Mr Shercek,' he said.

'Very well,' Shercek said with reluctance. Shan gave Cegario one last, pleading look, which was returned with indifference. Then he swallowed and dismounted.

'Keep him close to you,' Cegario said. He ignored the glare of pure hate that was coming from Shan.

'We will, Dr Cegarius,' Drinil promised. 'We will.'

And Dr Cegarius rode out of Dound.

\* \* \*

'For being a brat!' Cegario shouted into the night as he galloped. Free! Never again having to wake up to face another day of Shan's company! Never again having to listen to that piping whine! 'For complaining, moaning, grumbling, snivelling, for being unbearable, for getting us hooked by those soldiers in the first place!'

He knew exactly what was going through Drinil's mind. A compromise between two men of the world: I give you your freedom, you take this brat off my hands and work him to the bone. No doubt Drinil was even now thinking of all the uses Shan could be put to.

It was almost a pity.

Cegario stopped and dismounted. He rummaged in the saddle bags and found the orange and red robes of Dr Cegarius the fireworker. These he left under some bushes. The fireworker was dead: he would find another identity.

Then he turned to face the way he had come, reaching out in his mind for the familiar touch of the crystals.

\* \* \*

Shan groaned as the last pack was slung over his back. Drinil must have given him at least half his own weight again to carry.

‘How far?’ he said.

‘Only twenty miles to the border,’ Drinil said. ‘But we’ll stop at daybreak.’

‘Twenty-’

‘Shut up and walk, snot.’

Shan staggered on, along with the rest of Dound. Drinil strolled by his side with Shercek not far away. They were taking Cegario’s advice literally.

Shan noticed, hanging from Drinil’s belt, the small pouch that Cegario had given him. It looked offensively small and light.

‘Sure you don’t want me to carry that too?’ he sneered. Drinil clipped his ear.

‘One more word, snot, and you get another pack, right? And if you think I’m letting you get your hands on my crystals you’ve got another think coming.’

Shan trudged in sulky silence, until what Drinil had said connected in his mind. ‘Crystals? But ... but you can’t use the crystals!’ he said.

‘He gave me instructions.’

‘No! No one else can use them! I know!’ Shan insisted.

Drinil frowned and looked down at the pouch. ‘Then what-’ Their eyes met and he saw the dawning horror in the boy’s face. ‘No!’ he shouted.

Drinil fumbled at his side and tore the pouch from his belt. He flung it as far off the road as he could, at the same time shouting for Shercek. Shercek turned, puzzled, to see the blacksmith bearing down on him. Then Drinil had the mayor’s pouch and had flung it after the first.

‘Drinil, whatever-’

Twin shafts of fire blazed up from the field by the road, knocking the villagers flat.

Shan couldn’t get up with the packs weighing him down. He shrugged out of them and slowly stood up. Dogs were barking, children were crying and being comforted, people were shouting at the tops of their voices.

‘What ... what ...’ Shercek was gabbling. All of a sudden, Shan was fed up with the stupid rustic peasants and he let his impatience show.

‘You’re going to the same place he is and you know about him,’ he shouted. ‘What do you think?’ And he told you to keep me close to you, he thought, suddenly going cold.

Drinil turned round and beckoned. ‘C’mere, snot.’

Because Drinil could easily outrun him, Shan obeyed. To his surprise, the hand that fell on his shoulder was almost paternal.

‘You know the kind of man he is, snot,’ Drinil said. ‘When we get to Neress, d’you think you could find him again?’

‘Reckon I could,’ Shan agreed. He looked thoughtfully out into the darkness. ‘Yeah, I reckon I could.’