

# THE FØRGØTTEN MØNK

by Greg Stolze

## CHAPTER ØNE

He awoke as if he had never done so before.

Reaching for memories and grasping nothing was instantly terrifying. He lifted his eyelids but moved nothing else. His heart raced, but it was no effort of will to stay still. It was instinct.

He was reclining beneath an evergreen, its needles clustered in feathery sprays. He rolled his eyes carefully, looking around.

It was morning. The temperature was cool and balmy. The fresh scent of growing forest filled the air, undercut by the faint odor of running water. Straining his ears, he could hear the thrum of a river, not too distant.

Carefully, quietly, he sat up and took stock of himself.

Male. Swarthy skin, tanned on his arms, deepening to hands that were nut-brown with a reddish tinge. Blunt fingernails, no rings or grooves from rings. Heavy calluses on the palms and, strangely, on the first two knuckles. A leathery pad at the base of the hand, on the side opposite the thumb.

He frowned.

That heavy spot on his wrist blended to a line of toughened skin that extended up his elbow. His veins were thick and his muscles were dense. Coarse black hair ran down his arms, thinning at his rounded shoulders before returning lightly on his back and more heavily on his chest.

Running his hands up his neck he felt short, thick curls, giving way to weathered baldness. Part of his left ear was missing, sheared off at the very top and matched by a line of scar on the scalp beneath. He was clean-shaven, his cheeks dusted with scars from some youthful pox.

Muscular thighs. More callus on his shins, almost waxy. Gnarled, flat feet that bespoke an entirely shoeless life.

He stood. He'd slept in a linen loincloth, on top of a woolen cloak, its color an undyed grey. Hanging from a broken-off branch, as if from a garment hook, was a plain cotton robe. On the ground, beside the cloak, was a dagger. He gave it a long look, but turned his attention first to the clothes.

He sniffed himself, then the robe. It smelled like him—sweat, campfire, and a hint of incense. He put it back on. A rope belt was under it on the twig. He doubled it around his waist and tied it with the ease of long practice. Only then did he pick up and examine the weapon.

It had a heavy ring on the pommel, a well-used grip and thick quillons nicked and scarred from parried impacts. Unsheathed, the blade was black, smooth,

longer than his hand. A diamond-shaped cross section at the handle narrowed to a needle tip. It was slender along its whole length. Its metal was naturally dark, marked with kinked whorls and waves. He touched the edge. It was razor-keen. Tiny scratches and notches on its surface told him that, well-maintained as it was, it had seen use. Small grooves on the guard indicated that it was a little worn down from being turned, from grinding against something hard, metal or stone.

This was not a knife for cutting bread. He holstered it at the back of his rope belt.

Leaning against the tree was a plain, straight staff, fire hardened, perhaps six feet long. Beside it lay a leather rucksack, and his heart sped up. He reached, then paused.

He opened it.

Inside he found a loaf of brown bread, six red apples, and a large sausage. These were wrapped in white cloth and he set them aside. A purse beside them held a jangling blend of coins, golden and well-worn. He counted out twenty-five, struck in cities all across the Empire.

Beneath the food and money, and wrapped in another cotton robe, was a cask made of silver. Though he had no idea what priceless things he might have owned in the past, he had to think that this outshone them all in its clear, clean luster and intricate, abstract workmanship. It was quite heavy, and showed no sign of a latch or keyhole. He shook it and it felt as if something massy shifted within, but there was no sound of a rattle.

For a moment he stared. Then, with a shrug, he put down the cask and went to the river to drink.

# # #

When he returned, he held a wriggling fish in both hands, and its struggles—the soft wet slaps as its tail struck his forearms, the rasp of scales in his hands, the effort of not letting it squirm free to fall in the dirt—distracted him. It was not until he reached his camp site that he realized a woman was sitting on his cloak, devouring his provisions, and examining his silver cask with a great deal of interest.

He watched her for a moment before she jerked her head up and stared in his direction. She stood.

She was ten feet tall, almost twice his height.

“Hope you don’t mind,” she said, and bit off about a third of his sausage. Only a tiny end remained.

“There’s little I can do about it,” he replied. To his ears, his voice sounded just right—deep, low, fairly quiet.

“That’s behavior I like,” she said, and smiled. Her plain features were marred by blackened eyes and a smashed nose, with a small smear of blood dried

beneath it like a mustache. Her dress had once been lavish, but its brocade was stained from her nosebleed, and its hem was torn and muddy. On each wrist, she had a heavy iron manacle, but the chain between them was broken.

"Why don't you make a fire and cook that fish? The others should be along presently."

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked, tilting his head in genuine curiosity.

"Should I? But you, little man... do you know *me*?" She popped the last of his apples into her mouth as if it was a grape.

"I don't know anyone."

"I'm Ugmar Thurlby!" she said, spitting out the apple core in his direction. "If you hesitate with that fish you might take its place on the breakfast menu! I'm no great digester of human flesh, but my sister Ognutt is positively *mad* for man-ham! Lucky for you we're in a hurry."

A left-handed toss landed the fish in her lap. A small cracking sound came from the man's right hand as he clenched it and rotated it on the end of his wrist. "I'll give you the fish and the gold if you leave the cask and go on your way."

"You're bargaining with an empty purse."

He sighed.

"It seems very likely," he said, "That I know the Deadly Arts." He stepped forward, his arms gently forming curves in the air with the pure smoothness of a butterfly fanning its wings.

"You know what I know? ~~þóð~~ þóð!"

With her gesture, a violet bolt flickered from her hand and crashed into his chest with bruising force, but it didn't stop him. It didn't even slow him much as he charged forward and leaped into the air. He jerked his right knee up for extra height at the apex of his leap, and then his left foot smashed into her jaw.

Staggering back, she tried to grab him, but he performed a lazy-seeming back flip, somersaulting through the air to land on his feet. His right hand fell on the staff as if he was casually leaning on it to rest.

"I tried to warn you," he said, dodging a wild punch as she spat words he assumed were oaths. Then the timbre of her voice changed, producing the eerie echoes of enchantment. A sharp, actinic pop flung him backwards.

Undaunted he closed in again, spearing with the end of the staff, stabbing it at her and pulling it back like the flicker of a serpent's tongue. She pivoted away to the left, then flinched back as it feinted at her face, only to give a full-throated howl when it smashed down onto the top of her foot.

But her flailing arms caught the wooden shaft and jerked her enemy close. With a snarl she raised the weapon up over her head, pulling the wiry fighter up off the ground.

He walked a series of kicks up her body, culminating by wrapping his thighs around her throat and squeezing with face-crimsoning force.

“What? No magic words?” he panted, hanging from the weapon between her hands.

She lurched forward, trying to drive him into the ground, but his legs untwined in a twinkling. Instead of smashing back-first into the turf, his feet came down running and, before she could even think to let go of his stick, he'd pulled her down onto her knees.

He was preparing to feint at her head with a kick, then stab her in the face with the pole, when he heard something behind him.

Specifically, he heard a booming voice say “Ey, ‘ave off at our sister then!”

He looked back just in time to see a rock the size of his two fists flying at him with great speed. A gazelle-leap backwards saved him from the impact and, indeed, left the rock unimpeded on a trajectory right into Ugmar's stomach.

“Gah!” Ugmar bellowed. “Hetricia you slattern, you did that on purpose!”

“Didn't!” replied a higher tenor, but the denial was marred by giggles.

Turning, the man could see a family resemblance between Ugmar and the two newcomers. For one thing, one had manacle chains dangled from her forearms too, but they also had similar faces—broad foreheads, rounded noses, wide-spaced eyes. Hetricia was shorter (merely four feet taller than him), with more refined features and long, glossy auburn hair. The third, whom he guessed to be man-ham fancier Ognutt, was the biggest, and while Hetricia was tittering at her sister's discomfort, Ognutt's lumpy visage, ill-carved by nature, was convulsed with open hilarity. As he watched, she literally slapped her knee with mirth. She was the one with cuffs still on, and the broken chain between them rattled in counterpoint.

The man looked from Hetricia and Ognutt to Ugmar, and sprang towards the cask. He scooped it up and began sprinting full out as Ugmar shrieked “Stop him you fools! *Treasure!*”

“Ooh, shiny!” From the deep timbre of the words, he knew it was Ognutt chasing him, crashing through the forest on legs as long as he was tall. He didn't look back, he simply put his head down and ran.

“We don't have time for this!” came Hetricia's voice in an exasperated whine. “The cavs will be here any minute!”

He dodged left and right at erratic intervals, as if waiting for another rock to fly towards his back. Hearing the nearing noises of pursuit, he planted the pole behind a prominent root and vaulted up onto a low-hanging branch. He rapidly scrambled upward, scarcely slower than he'd run through the brush.

“Dere ‘ee is!” cried Ognutt, and he felt the branch beneath him shake as she launched herself into the trunk.

“Drop the silver, little man!” Ugmar was close behind, and with a gesture and a word, another violet bolt surged unerringly into his thigh. He dropped a few feet before catching himself, barely managing to keep hold of his prize.

“I can do this *all day!*” Ugmar shouted, following it up with another stinging enchanted assault.

"No yuh can't," Ognutt replied, "We gotta go 'fore them cavalry get through the woods."

"Shut up you *imbecile*, I'm trying to get him to come down!"

"Listen," Hetricia called up, her voice dishonestly sweet and bright. "We're in a touch of a hurry, so why not just drop the chest and we'll leave you be? Honest, it would be best for everyone!"

Clinging to a branch and unable to ascend further, the man shouted back the most obscene suggestion he could generate, in the circumstances.

For a moment, the sisters were silent, looking up with surprised expressions. Then Ognutt shouldered the tree again while Ugmar used her magic directly on the limb from which he hung. He tried to catch a branch on the way down, but Hetricia had found another rock and she shied it up into his ribs, forcing out a yelp as his property tumbled from his fingers.

Ugmar caught the glimmering prize with a greedy cry, and Ognutt grabbed the plunging man with a similar sound of gladness. He tried to crack his head back into her nose, but she just laughed and bear-hugged him with rib-popping force. When Hetricia stepped forward to grab his legs, he kicked her right at the base of her throat and reared back, but then she had his ankles.

"Ooh, 'ee's all stringy," Ognutt said in disappointment as he struggled in her grasp.

"Make him stop squirming!" Hetricia demanded.

Ognutt shifted her grip on his arms and then, with a deceptively small movement, broke both his shoulders.

He screamed, loud enough to send birds flying out of bushes for a great distance around, until Hetricia punched him in the stomach. Then he was too busy gasping and vomiting to shriek any more.

"Kiss your fortune goodbye," Ugmar said with an evil grin. Then she swung the silver casket into the side of his head and everything went dark.

# # #

The second time he struggled back to consciousness, he was somewhat reassured to find recent memories, at least. The black gulf where his life to that point had once been was still terrifying, but that fear was offset by relief at being alive at all.

"What's your name, stranger?"

He blinked, and worked his mouth around the strange taste of mint, and astringent, and enchantment. A green and purple flavor. Judging by the way his shoulders had shifted back into place, he'd been fed a healing draught. Nonetheless, his body ached.

"I wish I knew," he replied, sitting up.

"Easy. You're still a fair step from full function."

The voice was a pleasant tenor, and the hands that steadied him were warm, blunt, firm and strong. Blinking and focussing, he saw the face of a dwarven woman looking at him with concern... and just a shadow of suspicion.

"Did you catch them?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head. "How did you know I was chasing the sisters?"

"They mentioned a cavalry unit in pursuit: Your boot-toes are tapered to fit a stirrup, with a heel to catch it."

"Anyone could wear cavalry boots," she said, helping him to his feet.

"But the worn streaks on yours show they slide in and out." He cocked his head. "No spurs though. You must be an exceptional rider."

"Commander!" cried a voice from the river's edge. "We found their tracks... they made it to the water."

"Curses."

"Can't you follow them along the shore?" the stranger asked.

She shook her head. "There's a cliff, and falls, not far downstream. The Thurlby sisters can descend it easily enough, but we'd have to leave our horses, and without mounts they'd easily outpace us." She stamped her bandy legs in frustration.

"I'm sorry if I delayed you," the monk said. "But thank you for the gift of healing."

"Hm? Oh, think nothing of it. I could hardly leave you to die in the forest!"

"Had they not paused to break you, they'd have escaped us in any event," said a thin human soldier with sallow skin and a curved scar on his cheek.

The monk rubbed his eyes. They cleared a bit more, and he took in more details of the dwarf woman before him: A serious face, two braids the color of wet slate, obsidian eyes taking his measure. Long, thick eyelashes and a plump mouth. She smelled of clean horse, and iron, and oiled leather.

"I really don't remember anything," he said. "Anything at all."

"Not true," she replied. "Clearly you can talk."

"I recall how to do things, but not events."

"Not even your own name?" the scarred soldier asked.

He shook his head.

"Hmph," the dwarf rubbed her chin. "Well, you can come to the muster house and we'll see if anyone's posted a watch-for about you... it's not likely, most watch-for's are criminals, and people important to wizard-folk..."

"I could be either one of those things," the stranger said.

"I'm Gruttla Hammerheart," she said, shaking his hand. "Can you ride, brother mystery?"

"I've no idea."

It turned out he couldn't.

# # #

It also turned out that the cask and his money were gone. He'd expected nothing less. He shook leaves and specks of bark off his cloak and draped it around his shoulders.

"You're either a monk or you're dressed as one," Gruttla said, looking him up and down.

"I think I am... this ring of hair, the skin under it is pale?"

She leaned in. "Yep."

"And the top of my head is tanned like my face. So I've worn my hair this way for some time."

"Did your reflection look familiar at least?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure I know what it would feel like, to have a thing be familiar."

"Probably under a curse," offered the scar-faced soldier, who'd been introduced as Sergeant Horm. "We could take him to Lyr..."

"Don't," Gruttla said in a warning tone. Her eyelids lowered like the head of an angry bull.

Horm raised his hands and looked away, then helped the monk onto a horse.

"I don't think I've ridden one of these before," he said.

"No, I don't figure you have," Gruttla said, critically eyeing his posture and adjusting the stirrups for him. "Well Rainbow there's as docile a mount as we have on offer, she'll follow Brute here if you leave the reins limp... you aren't to hold them like that."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me, you're the one who's going to be sore. Lucky it's not far."

# # #

After conferring with Horm and the other soldiers, Gruttla dispatched them in several directions to alert other imperial units, and to pass on the bad news that the three half-giantesses had escaped. She, she said, would ride back to their own headquarters with the forgotten monk and see what could be learned.

As they rode (as uncomfortably as she'd predicted, despite the flexibility of his hip joints), they settled on the name "Brother Cipher" for him, and she finally asked him about the dagger.

"Is it yours?"

"Er... it was in my possession when I woke up. Why? Do you recognize it?"

The road before them was a narrow dirt track with deep wheel-ruts. Even though it was clear and straight, she looked down at it, rather than at him, before saying, "The Crusader's people bear knives like that. So either you are one, or you were one, or you took it from one."

"The Crusader?"

That got her eyes back on him.

"You know the icons," she said, voice flat.

He said nothing. To the left, the forest came up thick and close, dense shrubs with waxy dark-green leaves creeping over the tall grass, arching hemlocks and cedars behind them. To the right, a thorn hedge guarded a tilled field from animal mischief.

"Perhaps," he said, "I'd like to hear you talk of them."

She snorted, but complied. "The Crusader styles himself 'the fist of the Dark Gods' and this region, the Burnished Prairie, was... good enough, at least when I first arrived. The Thurlby sisters were here, bullying lesser criminals and getting their noses into everything, but it wasn't worse than elsewhere.

"Then a Hellhole opened up—a little hole-poke through to the Abyss, right down there along the banks of the Silverwine river—so there were demons everywhere. Just... you can't imagine, fire and carnage and the Emperor's forces were on it pretty quick. But... closing the hole, they couldn't do it. We had them in a standoff, and then in comes the Crusader and he says he can take care of it, him and his soldiers march on the Hellhole and break the demons to saddle, near enough."

"That's good, isn't it?"

Her lip curled. "Anyone that can make a demon bend knee and cry 'master' isn't someone to trust, even if he saved your farms. He's real open about the Dark Gods and their plans, or he says he is. Says everything has to be burned down, stripped, swept clean... and then, once we're all the starving, shackled slaves of his masters, they can start to rebuild the world. If we prove our loyalty and devotion, they will gradually loosen their grasp until we barely even know we're unhappy."

"I don't recall it, of course, but that doesn't seem to be how he's been described, to me." He frowned.

"Well no, most people haven't seen his army up close." Gruttla was warming to her topic, easily keeping a comfortable balance on her horse while gesturing with her right hand. "They haven't heard one of his little lackeys—and my, does he have an absolute *passel* of lickspittle officers who can't say his title without sounding full of admiration! Those fools, they talk about the Great New Order, and how we're livestock and will be happier with boots on our necks because then things will finally make sense." She shook her head, voice peculiarly balanced between disgust and incredulity. "And people follow them! There's talk of letting them build their, their *fanés* and *dark temples* in the holy city of Santa Cora! People volunteer and line up to devote themselves to these 'Captains of Evil' because at least when you're on the Crusader's side, you can *schedule* when you're going to suffer and know exactly how much. And they don't like to let people die, if they can get something from them. Too many folks are willing to be miserable as long as it's the misery they know, and that's what the Crusader promises. Safe, unhappy security."

They rode on in silence for a moment. They were nearing the outskirts of a small town, and then a green woman burst from the shrubbery at the side of the road.

“Oh officer! Oh do stop, help, my husband... he is dead!”

## CHAPTER TWO

Gruttla reined in her great steed and furrowed her brow. "Nagatia, what happened?"

"I returned home from marketing in Farfield and he... he..." She burst into tears. "He killed himself!"

Gruttla looked at her, then at Cipher.

"I can wait," the monk said. "I... am in no hurry and going nowhere."

"I have to inspect any deliberate death... seize and purify any deodands, look for occult symbols..."

They dismounted, and the monk tried to be discreet as he rubbed sensation back into numbing buttocks. He frowned at the green woman's flowing hair and svelte figure as she led them into a cozy cottage of two rooms.

"I'm... I apologize for..." she stammered at him as Gruttla frowned at the room.

"If anyone needs be sorry, it is I," the monk said softly. "I would not intrude on your grief."

Her tears welled up again. Close, he could see that her skin was generally the bright green of a spring leaf, but darker freckles the hue of pine needles were scattered across her nose and cheeks. Awkwardly, he put an arm around her shoulder.

Eventually, she calmed and excused herself and offered tea. The kitchen was detached from the house, to keep it cooler in the summer, and Cipher visibly relaxed when she left.

"Pity you're getting dragged into this," Gruttla said, fidgeting. "I jointed the army to ride horses and smite a few orcs, not to get involved in people's private sorrows. Nagatia and Perdu have lived here for decades, he makes tools..."

"I can see that," Cipher said, glancing over the workbench that occupied most of one wall of the house. "Mostly wooden handles and spinning wheels, I'd say?"

Gruttla shrugged. "Well... on with it."

She opened the door to the second room. A wide double bed greeted their eyes, its headboard elaborately carved with fruit, grains, trees and twisting vines. The bedspread was a nice piece of quilting, but the room's pleasant design only enhanced the horror of the aged form sprawled within. Perdu was in his fifties at least, and he was crumpled against the bed, eyes open, legs splayed on the floor, perfectly still.

"Damn," Gruttla muttered. In death, the old man had soiled himself. "You don't have to be here for this, if you want to wait by the horses..."

"No," Cipher said, "It's fine."

Gruttla glanced from the body to him. He didn't look horrified, but terribly intent.

"I guess you've seen the dead before," she said.

"It seems so. May I...?" he gestured.

She shrugged and he came closer.

"I think I found our deodand," she said, sniffing at a small, rose-colored bottle next to the bed. "Cackshorn concentrate. Pfaugh, what a stink."

He was bending over the corpse, frowning.

"Did Perdu seem unhappy?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Old man, steady job, fair wife... but humans often seek out reasons to be miserable in the heart, if you don't mind me saying."

"About her... she's..." Cipher seemed to be struggling to phrase his thought.

"Well, she's easily as old as he is. Was. I don't know the whole story, she's of some lineage... doesn't show the years, lucky thing. Makes oils to revive weary fields, sells them throughout the district. What are you doing?"

Cipher stood up from a stooped posture, nose inches from the dead man's chest and mouth.

"Do you see... ah, there it is." A shelf of small sculptures and a few books occupied a wall beside the bed, and he reached out for a small clay pot with a cork in its wide neck. He pulled opened it and sniffed, nodding. Inside was something thick and grey-green.

"What? That's... crowroot salve, right?" Gruttla asked.

"Smells like it." Cipher pointed at Perdu's chest. Over the topmost pajama button, a thin residue of the same substance was visible. Gruttla frowned.

"Lots of people use crowroot salve," she said. "Eases congestion, loosens the chestly humors... I've used it myself once or twice."

"And you haven't killed yourself."

She put her fists on her hips and gave Cipher a level stare.

"I'll not have you play the ass with me, stranger. Not over a sad, dead old man."

"I don't think he drank the poison," Cipher said. "Who puts on medicine and then kills himself?"

"Perhaps... he drank it by accident?" She sounded uncertain.

"Did you not say crowroot clears the nose? If he could smell the poison's stench, could he take it in error?"

"This makes no sense," she growled.

"None yet." Cipher paced the room, looking at the body from several angles, then squatted down. "Are you familiar with the venom? You recognized its scent."

"Cackshorn grows in the forests nearby. People use it on unwanted scavengers, rats and possums."

"How does it kill?"

"It depends. If a person eats a little of it over days, just illness... stomach wind and bellyache and fever. But this," she said, picking up the rose-glass bottle, "It's concentrated. That's why it makes your nose burn. Even a few drops and you die, fast and hard."

"Convulsing?" Cipher asked. "He looks like he threw himself out of bed."

"It does look that way, doesn't it?"

"It takes effect immediately?"

She shrugged. He squatted down and peered beneath the bed.

"Well?" Gruttla asked.

"Someone swept up recently," he said, reaching under the bed and revealing a dust-free hand. "Missed this though."

Lying in his palm was a shard of clear crystal.

# # #

"Can you think of anyone who'd have a reason to hurt your husband?"

"No!" Nagatia said, her lovely eyes wide. "No, we were both well-liked! Why, no one's said a harsh word to us in years. We're inside the Repel here, so there's... there's really nothing to..."

"The 'Repel'?" Cipher asked.

"Oh, not long after the Hellhole opened up, some wizards set up a ring of warding stones around Belton's Hill, demons can't cross it."

Cipher glanced at Gruttla as she shifted uncomfortably and looked away, but Nagatia seemed not to notice.

"Did he have anything anyone might covet?" Gruttla said.

"Well... no, honestly. We put most of our money back into the business..."

Cipher and Gruttla exchanged a look.

"Do you really think my husband was murdered?" Nagatia asked, voice low and pleading.

"All I know is that this situation makes little sense," the monk replied. "Clearly some tragedy is at play, and we have yet to see its full depths."

After a few more fruitless words of condolence, the dwarf and the man covered the body and carried it outside.

"I would have let you take the ankles," Gruttla said, idly untangling the mane of her massive black steed. "I can carry a load and my shoulders weren't broken this day."

"I wanted to sniff his mouth," Cipher said. He leaped into the saddle, then winced.

"Gents do say it's wiser to mount slowly," Gruttla told him.

"I am pleased to know anything about myself, even that I am no horseman."

"So what did you smell on his lips?"

"Not cackshorn concentrate, that's for certain. Who'd have it?"

"Anyone could get the roots, but for the concentrate? The village alchemist. His name's Amblard."

# # #

The alchemist's home was conveniently close, and when asked about cackshorn concentrate, he regretfully said he'd sold his last dram the day before.

"There's usually little call for it this time of the season. I can start a distillation... mm, I'm using the prime athanor and the secondary would need time to heat up, but tomorrow morning, unless you need a great quantity..."

He was a young man, soft spoken and deferential. He was short and thin, with brown hair and spectacles. He stood behind a sturdy counter. Its top was a slab of granite, stained with the residue of countless potions and elixirs. Shelves behind him held an array of herbs in clay jars, glass bottles of distillates, pestles for grinding, and scales with delicate brass weights. One shelf near the top held small, pink glass bottles.

"Can I ask who bought it?"

"Old Mr. Perdu up the way," the alchemist said, turning away to return to grinding a fine yellow powder. "Poor fellow's been under the weather lately..."

"Did he say what he wanted it for?" Gruttla asked, but the monk interrupted.

"I'm sorry but do you have an outhouse or a chamber pot I could...?"

"Sure," the young apothecary said, offhandedly gesturing out a side door. "About twenty paces downwind there, just past the midden-heap." As the monk left, he turned back to Gruttla and said, "I think he mentioned something... but I can't quite recall it, sorry. You know how it can be, where you pay imperfect attention?" He gave her a wry, conspirator's look.

She didn't return it. "When you say he seemed under the weather... were you treating him for anything?"

"Oh, the usual stuff, aches and pains... had a summer cold he couldn't seem to shake... old man bowels..."

"Is there anyone else to whom you sold the concentrate?"

"Just about anyone who farms or stores grain, at some time or another. Except people who go out and harvest their own, but the concentrate's better, a lot faster so you don't have them crawling back into the walls to die and stink up your store-room..."

"Is the concentrate hard to make?"

He frowned. "Not very hard, no. You'd have to be wary. If you don't know what you're about, you can get a dose of fumes, faint away and knock your head."

"What about wine?" the monk asked, coming back into the shop.

"Mm?"

"In wine. Would wine cover the scent and taste of cackshorn?"

"I... have no idea. Why would you ask?"

Gruttla looked over at Cipher, then back at the alchemist. "Perdu is dead, and we suspect cackshorn poisoning."

She watched his reaction closely. He paled, stared, then looked away. "Perdu... dead? Are you sure? I mean, he was just... just here. I saw him only the other day!"

"When he bought the concentrate," the monk prompted.

"Yes, exactly, he must have..." He put his hands to his mouth, eyes getting wide in horror. "Oh he can't have. You don't think he bought...? No, I mean, he was sad but I never thought he'd..."

"Me either, and I never met him." Cipher's tone was sharp and hard, and Gruttla twisted her head to look at him. "I think you put it in a bottle of wine and went to see him while his wife was at town."

"What! I would never... how dare you? Who are you to come in here and accuse me of, of... Perdu was my friend!"

"Then why was the bottle that killed him in your trash pile?" Cipher held up a few clear crystal shards, gripped carefully through his sleeves. "This piece in my left hand was the one you missed in his bedroom. It fits right here. I reckon this part was the bottle neck?"

"No. I don't know what happened, but I *did not* kill my neighbor!"

"Stranger," Gruttla said, "Maybe the killer just threw away the bottle on Amblard's garbage."

"Those red bottles, those are for dangerous potions? An empty one was found by Perdu's body, but if he'd poisoned himself he'd have broken it in his convulsions. The way he broke a clear bottle of wine, the one you gave him!"

"Look, I think I see where we've become misled," Amblard said earnestly, reaching below the counter.

"Hands on your head!" Gruttla barked, but the young man had ducked down. Cipher dropped the shards to charge, but a single scrawny hand hurled something in a looping arc into the room and the cavalry woman tried to catch it.

The object was two thin bottles lashed together, and they broke when she caught them. As soon as the essences inside combined, they exploded violently. There was a flash, a crash, and a force like the fall of a mountain.

Brother Cipher didn't quite fall unconscious, but he was momentarily dazed as he watched Amblard emerge from cover and unsteadily climb up the shelves, pushing aside shattered bottles. At the top, he crawled out through the back wall's window.

Swearing most foully, and unable to hear his own oaths, Cipher lurched out the side door and around the building's rear. A steep hill descended towards an edge of light forest, and Amblard was already picking up speed as he ran, but Cipher's legs reacted with a burst of strength, ignoring the powdering of cuts from the blast, unimpeded by the unfamiliar aches of riding. He was catching up fast, and after a glance over his shoulder, Amblard realized it. He pulled up and, panting, bellowed "STOP!"

In each hand, he held a glass jar.

"These are... dragon ichor," the alchemist panted, eyes wide. "Red and white. You saw... what happened in the shop. That was... thirty grains of each." He huffed for a few moments, gathering his breath. Seeing that the monk was no closer, he added, "This quantity will leave nothing of us to bury. I don't care. If I can't have her..."

"The wife," the monk said, and edged a step closer.

"STAY BACK! Yes, her! It was all for her! He didn't make her *happy*, how could he? There was nothing of him left!"

"You don't have to do this," the monk said.

"BUT I WILL!"

For a moment, they stood, frozen, each immobilizing the other. Then there was a muffled metallic 'clang' from the hill behind the monk. With a shriek, the alchemist spun, blood arcing from one arm, but Cipher had already moved. He sprang, covering the five paces between them in an instant, his whole body curling in midair around the jar in the young man's left hand. He hit the ground rolling, desperately striving to keep the fragile container intact.

"Next one's through your head if you try any more nonsense!" Gruttla's voice was raw and very angry. She was stalking forward with a brass tube held in both hands, aiming down it as if it was a crossbow. Against her shoulder, it ended in a square chunk of yellow metal.

"Don't let him break the jar!" Cipher shouted, carefully setting his own bottle on the turf. It held something crimson, and felt warm even through the glass.

"We're trying this again," Gruttla said, now at close range, still aiming her weapon. "Put. Your. Hands. On your head. Or you'll be fishing for a bolt in your eye-hole."

# # #

The young man sobbed as Gruttla ordered him onto his stomach and lashed his hands behind his back. When Cipher pointed out that one of her plaits had been singed, she cursed and tightened the bonds until he cried out. She bandaged the bolt-wound in Amblard's shoulder, but was ungentle about it.

"If I'd known I was facing a foe I'd have worn my helmet," she said, fuming.

"Are you all right?" Cipher asked.

"Angry more than hurt," she said, wiping blood from her nose. "A few days' rest and some strainwort ointment, I'll be good as new."

"Does someone besides him sell medicine?"

She sighed. Marching the prisoner to the mounts, she tied his wrists to a ring at the base of her saddle.

"You're bound by law now, you lascivious wretch," she told him. "You'll cool your arse in prison until a knacker-priest comes to call."

"No!" he cried. "But...!"

"Murder by deception warrants the axe," she said, gesturing for the monk to take the steed. It was the lighter horse, Rainbow, and Cipher suggested he'd be just as happy leading it.

"Please yourself," she said, easily mounting her own huge animal. "If he makes a break for it, I'll mallet his head." She was manipulating the brass weapon she'd used on his shoulder. As Cipher watched, the tube telescoped into a handle, and the block at the end rotated around to present a hammer face.

"What did you... um, fire at him?" he asked, regarding the device curiously.

"The Weapon That Is All Weapons," she replied. "That's its title, in any event. Fourth Age clockwork, family heirloom, magic..." She shifted the weight of the long warhammer easily from one hand to the other. With a few well-practiced twists, the handle shortened, and the head changed position again until she was holding a nicely balanced mace. A soft, mechanical click, and half the haft seemed to dissolve into chain, leaving her swinging a heavy flail. Then with a half-twist, a shake and the press of a button, it was the warhammer again.

"Versatile," Cipher said.

"Nothing with a blade," she said, "But there's a mechanism in there that fires bolts like a heavy crossbow."

"I'll be good," their prisoner said. "Please... if you have any pity, can you get me something for the pain?"

"Could have done, if *someone* hadn't turned the local alchemy store into a heap of jangled trash." With that, she gestured down the road and Cipher started pulling Rainbow forward.

They trudged and rode in silence for a quarter of an hour, before Gruttla said, "Just how long were you planning on murdering your friend, then?"

"Planning?" Amblard said. "I had... the *thought* for years. I mean, I lived right by her, saw her... nigh daily. Started timing my trips to the stream by what I knew of when she'd fetch water. She favored me, I knew it! She wouldn't have wanted him to die, she's too kind for that, but... she's a young woman, tied to an old man..."

"She's his same age at least," Gruttla said. "Her children are close to your age."

"You lie!"

"You've seen how we dwarves age, and the elves," she said, impatient. "What makes you think a woman green of skin isn't long-lived as well? It's really only humans and orc-stock that have such brief, mayfly lives."

"Oh Bright Gods," the alchemist moaned. "She probably thought I was ridiculous!"

"She may have had a point," Gruttla replied. "When did you decide to poison him?"

"I... got a glib-tongue potion," Amblard said, eyes now staring down at Rainbow's rear hooves. "That was when I realized I could truly... *do* it. I mean, I'd

been thinking about how for so long, but I didn't think I could lie to her about it. But a draught that makes one a convincing liar! With that, I... I dared."

"And then you had to use it on us," Cipher said.

"I got scared," Amblard whispered.

"Rightly so." Gruttla's voice was brisk, and she urged Cipher to hasten his pace.

# # #

When they reached the muster house, Amblard was staggering but seemed numb to his misery. He answered no questions, just trudged, peering at his own feet.

The building was on a promontory outside a pleasant market town, looking over it like a lovably ill-tempered doorman watching a lordling's children in a courtyard. A square stone wall surrounded it, with each corner holding up a wooden outlook. A bell tolled as Gruttla came into view, and the outpost's gate creaked open as she neared.

Inside, a mule walked in a circle to fill a cistern by water-screw, the constant trickle a pleasant counterpoint to the clop-clop of the animal's hooves. Rainbow immediately turned towards a well-tended stable, but a click from Gruttla's tongue brought the mare up short.

"Who's this then? Amblard the alchemist?" A lanky woman with pointed ears and green eyes emerged from the two-story fort at the center of the enclosure. Like the soldiers who'd pursued the Thurlby sisters, she wore leather and a breastplate.

"Amblard the murderer, more like," Gruttla replied, dismounting. "Take him up to the cells, will you?"

"What? No, who'd he kill then?"

"Perdu the tool-maker. Crime of thwarted love."

"Please, could we...?" Amblard began, but a flick to his ear from Gruttla's finger ended his plea with a yelp.

"Quiet, you. I'm still in ire about my hair."

A quick glance from Cipher showed barred windows on the second floor, and a crenelation around the entire top to make its roof a platform for arrow-fire. As they walked to the stable, Gruttla pointed out a horse trough.

"We can drink inside, after them. I'll have Tark see to the horses... I doubt you know how to tend one."

Cipher nodded.

"So..." Gruttla continued, "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Know all of it! Know that Perdu didn't die by his own hand, and that he drank poison wine, and that the real bottle was on Amblard's trash heap?"

The monk shrugged.

"Listen... I don't know what we may learn of you tomorrow, or what you may recall in time, but you're penniless and homeless now. Is that fair to say?"

"Most fair," he agreed.

"I have soldiers under my command, but... their duties are, um, very clear. They are direct implements, if you see what I'm saying. As an officer, I'm very well served, no complaints."

"I'm glad to hear it," Cipher replied.

"But as a magistrate, I oft have need of..." She shrugged. "I know not what. Something you seem to have, though. Discernment. A hunting mind."

"Perhaps just a nose to smell ointment on a soiled body?"

She chuckled, but her eyes were serious. "Magistrates can deputize people to help maintain order. It's no official position, just a personal assistant, like hiring a butler or groom. I... don't have a deputy right now. The pay is one gold coin of Axis per day, a berth in the barracks and dinner with the soldiers. Everything could change with a sunset..."

"Spoken in sooth," the monk chuckled. "By morning, we could learn that I'm a wanted man."

"But assuming it doesn't, shall we consider it? You seem to have the skills for it."

He looked her up and down, then nodded.

"Aye."

# # #

Dinner was beef stew, black bread, and bad news.

"No tell of the sisters," Horm said, jabbing at the dregs of his meal as his plate had let the prisoners escape.

"They'll be well aground now," said the pointy-eared woman, whose name was Mursei. Her hands had archers' calluses and her walk bespoke a life in the saddle. "Tomorrow we can roust the gamble-shack and ask at Pibor's distillery, but they'd be fools to go there directly."

"At least Ugmar will have to get her reagents and magical whatnot back into shape before working anything of note. Lyridel saw to that," said a young man with a blonde beard. This was Tark.

"Lyridel?" Cipher asked, voice quiet. "Why do you look to the commander when you speak that name?"

A wary glance traveled around the table. The bearded youth lowered his voice and said, "Ask when we're alone."

Cipher nodded, eyes neutral.

"So stranger," Tark continued at natural volume. "I hear you acquitted yourself well against the sisters, and armed with no more than a looped dagger."

"I don't know how well I did," Cipher said, reaching past the ale for the water jug. "They ate my breakfast, took my goods and broke my shoulders. If that's a victory, I'd hate to see a loss."

"Aye you would," Horm said. "Had you lost, you'd be halfway through Ognutt's belly by now."

"In sooth?" Cipher drank, then wiped his mouth. "I'd thought the wizarding one just said that to scare me."

Mursei shook her head. "I've seen too many gnawed bones and known too many who took a bite to the thighs by that great monster."

"Yet if death offered me one taking for free, I'd spend it on Hetricia," Sergeant Horm said.

"Indeed?" Cipher asked. "Over the cannibal and the enchanter?"

"Ognutt you hear coming," Horm said, "And Ugmar can only cast her weaker spells without her wand and her toad-eyes and... accoutrements. Hetricia though, she's a shapeshifter. Anyone you don't know could come all tall and tricksome as soon as you turn your back."

"That's who's going to be slipping into and out of town," Tark said.

"If they stay about," Mursei said. "Who's to say they won't decamp for Shadowport or Drakkenhall?"

"Start all over? Nay," Horm topped off his ale cup and filled Mursei's at her gesture. "They have friends here, and hiding places, and debtors. They'll stay on this land until they're buried under it, I'd wager my toe on it."

"Wouldn't the magic on the town keep them out?" Cipher asked. "The... um, Repel?"

"That's for demons only, more's the pity. Crooks, goblins, servants of the Dark Gods, madmen, fools and biting flies? All such pestilences can pass the stones as they please."

"Hm." Cipher sat back from the table and adjusted the rope across his stomach. "How long have the sisters been troubling this region, then?"

"Since before any of us got stationed here," Mursei said.

"They're pure local," Horm told him. "Mother was some kind of regional witch, or enchantress, or sorceress. Mad as snowfall in a hat, too. I don't know what kind of woman conceives a grand passion for a hill giant..."

"I heard it was a stone giant," Tark said. Horm made an irritated gesture, like waving off a fly, and continued.

"Whatever giant it was, she had some kind of size changing device, or spell, or... implement. So she used that to... conduct her seduction." His lip curled.

"I expect the townfolk found this disagreeable," Cipher said.

"Dunno." The blonde soldier wiped his beard with the back of his hand and said, "Maybe the villagers were happy the giants were distracted."

"Don't be disgusting," Mursei said, and rapped him on the back of the head with her knuckle.

"The mum was a proper crazy witch-o-the-woods and the daughters are just worse," Horm said. "Started with banditry when they were barely six feet tall and gradually every other miscreant in the region either got killed, knuckled under, departed, or died of miscellaneous causes." His scar compressed with a smile that never reached his eyes. "They were sitting pretty, crime princesses for a year or two, before the Hellhole gaped wide."

At that moment, the dining hall door slammed open and a tall man with broad shoulders and extraordinary white teeth stormed in.

"How in all *hells* did the Thurlby sisters escape?" he demanded.

Along Cipher's bench, everyone's shoulders dropped an inch or two.

"Meet Sergeant Dovestrom," Mursei whispered to Cipher.

"He did ask the question I was wondering," the monk murmured back, watching curiously as Dovestrom stomped over to Gruttla's lone table and dropped a hand onto it hard. Her ale-mug, crafted from the dome of an ogre's skull, jumped and sent a tongue of foam down its side.

"Compose yourself, sergeant," she said, without standing.

He reared back to his full height, turning crimson.

"We chased them for years," he said through clenched teeth. "How...?"

"Do you suppose it was carelessness?" Gruttla asked, looking levelly up at him. "Horm nearly perished before we could get a potion down his throat, and Tark's horse had to be put down."

"But... you had them manacled! You had them on neck poles and..."

"There was an ambush," she said calmly. "Farnbarr's sons. They'll do no more bidding of the sisters, nor of their old man either."

Realizing the gravity of the struggle, Dovestrom's took a step back and sank into a chair. "Was anyone else injured? Where's Lyridel?"

"Lyridel chose not to accompany us." Gruttla looked down at her plate, trimmed a line of fat off her pork chop, and ate it.

"What do you mean chose...?"

"The elf's duties were not as yours, nor did they extend to prisoner transport. Our... association was always a voluntary one. Lyridel, in this instance, saw greater profit in other tasks."

Her voice remained calm throughout, but Cipher could see how tightly she was gripping her knife and fork.

"She was in on it," Dovestrom said. "I don't believe it, but... I can't bring myself to disbelieve it either."

Gruttla stood at that, eyes flashing. "Perhaps a week on prisoner rations can bring about your disbelief! I'm as angry as anyone that we lacked magical reserves, but there is no evidence to ground your accusation!"

"You have to admit, the timing is awfully suspicious."

"Lyridel would never collude with Farnbarr's get, nor would they be fool enough to suggest it. I daresay my old deputy will know great anger and regret for failing to contribute to their deaths."

"Probably had a fit of hot dice," Tark muttered. Horm nodded.

"I misspoke in anger, Commander," Dovestrom said. "I beg your pardon, pray."

"You have it for the asking, in the form of prison rations for two days only."

He opened, then closed his mouth and went to sit heavily at the table with the troops. Gruttla returned to her dinner after a deep quaff at her tankard.

# # #

"Lyridel was Gruttla's last deputy, then?" Cipher asked Tark as the soldier led him to the empty bunk under his own. There were twenty-four beds in two ranks, and theirs was closest to the door, farthest from the fireplace.

"A wizard," Tark replied.

"Ah."

"They're not known as mighty respecters of orders and authority." The bed was a wooden frame, strung with a web of ropes. "And, well, Lyridel has a weakness for cards and dice." Tark fussed with a rush-stuffed mattress and showed Cipher a battered footlocker. The monk's empty bag and unused cloak looked woefully small in its corners.

"Who are you, then?"

Cipher turned to see Sergeant Dovestrom before them, hands on hips.

"Would that I knew, sir," Cipher said. "Or is it 'your excellence'? Among my other lacks, I'm unclear how to address a duke, or earl, or baron, and I don't know which you are."

Dovestrom squinted at Tark, who held up his palms. "I said nothing."

"I guessed," Cipher said. "By your teeth."

"My teeth," Dovestrom repeated.

"Most present and clean," Cipher said, stepping closer and looking up at the taller man. "So you ate much meat in your youth. But your skin shows none of the wear of the outdoor hunter, not like Mursei. So either merchant or nobleman, and merchants don't wear signet rings."

"I am an heir of Wheatgirt, but as long as I serve, you can call me Sergeant. That's honor enough. And you? No titles?"

Cipher's dry grin was snaggle-toothed. "I have the mouth of a pauper."

"And recall no childhood?"

"No, none."

"Hm! It seems you are a perfect fool then." The sergeant took a slow half-step forward, as if idly.

"Judged by the company I'm keeping, maybe so. But my forgetting is real."

The saber at Dovestrom's hip had a clean, efficient design and no excess decorations, but was clearly of superior manufacture. The nobleman's hand fell on it with familiar comfort.

"You claim to be adept in the Deadly Arts?" he asked.

"I claim nothing."

Dovestrom's nostrils flared and Tark looked uneasily between the two men. They were now decidedly close, the narrowing space between them unfriendly.

"Should I make a fire, sir?" Tark asked. "I could kindle one and take the brother out for more wood..."

"Fetch wood on your own," Dovestrom said, never looking away from Cipher. "I think I'll evaluate our guest's skill at arms. Unless you're disinclined?"

"No, I'm as curious as you." A soft crackle arose as Cipher clenched a fist and twisted it at his arm's end.

# # #

The sun was low in the sky as they left the watch house palisade. Cipher had a wooden practice sword from a rack in the common room. The sergeant took a more detailed replica from the box at the foot of his bunk.

"Is that balanced like your real sword?" Cipher asked as they walked. "It hangs the same."

"A gift," he said. "Made from southern shred-bark... it's what the black desert tribes use for their lances. They call the trees 'the axe-breaker'."

"Whereas this is... local?" Cipher made a few experimental stabs.

"Hm, a saber doesn't stab like a straight sword," Dovestrom said with a small grin. "It's for slashing and cutting. Hence the curve."

"Noted."

Behind them walked a small cluster of soldiers, including Mursei and Horm.

"We can trade, if you think it's an unfair advantage," Dovestrom added.

"I have no basis to guess who has the advantage."

"Remember he survived an encounter with a hungry Ognutt," Horm called.

"So he says," Dovestrom replied, then turned back to Cipher. "Would you be more comfortable with a dagger, perhaps? We could use that black one you have. Just bind it in its sheath so that you don't stab me... by accident."

"I would never stab you unless I intended to, sergeant."

"I'll keep that in mind. I hear those Crusader knives are sharp and strong, but I've never had the chance to try one. How did you...? But of course, you conveniently don't remember."

"I don't find it convenient."

They reached a flat patch of open grass.

"Right," Horm said, stepping between them. "Two hits of three, start at five paces. You want to start sheathed or drawn?"

"I'll defer to the sergeant," Cipher said.

"Sheathed then?" Dovestrom asked.

"Like nobles, I suppose."

"I just feel you can get a glimpse into a man's character, that moment when he's struggling for the moment's advantage."

"Get on with it," Horm snapped, positioning them and stepping back. "On my word."

Both put hands on hilts. Each had one foot forward, poised.

"Go."

The pair swept forward, like water to the bottom of a dry streambed when the rains come. Dovestrom's wooden blade cleared its sheath in an instant, but Cipher left his in his belt. Instead, his empty hands snapped forward, clenching into twin fists just as they struck the side of the mock-sword slashing viciously into his side.

He uttered a cry that seemed loud and sharp enough to break the world, and Dovestrom was holding a hilt with splintered shards of wood in it.

"Halt!" Horm called.

The two fighters stared, and then Cipher stepped back. It looked easy and casual, but he cleared ten feet in an eyeblink.

"Clearly that hit goes to you," Cipher said, in a calm voice crueler than any mockery.

"You...!"

"'Twas your blade that struck my flesh, I admit it. Though apparently your replica got the worse of it."

"Again!" Dovestrom snarled.

"Careful. Your visage is true crimson, I'd hate to have you fight at the disadvantage of apoplexy."

"Easy," Horm said, spearing the monk with a glare.

"Let's try that exchange you mentioned earlier," Cipher said, pulling out his own wood sword and tossing it to the nobleman. "Sword on dagger. Perhaps I'll avoid a touch in *that* crossing. We can start with blades out. Like commoners."

With an oath, Dovestrom charged. Cipher gave way, blocking with his sheathed dagger. Dovestrom recovered quickly and slashed again, more reserved but just as intent. This time the monk blended with the movement. Dovestrom tried to sidestep, to create the space where his weapon would be unbound and work to his advantage, but as soon as his weight came off his close foot, Cipher kicked it out and the officer crashed to the ground.

"Wait, dammit!" Horm barked.

Cipher backed off, again moving smoothly and with perfect composure. Dovestrom, to his credit, regained his feet quickly, though with less grace.

"Does a knockdown count as a touch for me?" Cipher asked. "Are we tied?"

"You're good, I'll admit that," Dovestrom said, panting.

"Possibly just lucky. Especially since that crude wooden cudgel isn't balanced like your fine saber."

"Fists then," Dovestrom said.

Cipher raised an eyebrow. "Interesting."

"Wait, both of you," Horm said, giving each a glare. Then he went over to Cipher.

"Don't humiliate him," he said, voice low. "He's a man who wears his cruelties on a banner and hides his virtues close, but the virtues are there. You'll win no friends or admirers by breaking his bones."

"We're just having a simple match so he can gauge my skill."

"If you believe that, you truly are head-touched."

Then Horm crossed the field and spoke with the other sergeant. Cipher couldn't hear them over the surge of his heightened pulse, but he put no effort into catching the words. Instead he concentrated on stilling his breath, keeping his body supple and ready.

When Horm had backed away from Dovestrom, the pair again took their positions ten paces apart. Now Cipher stood with one hand high and one low, weight back on his left foot and his right leg poised to strike. Dovestrom crouched, hands raised in the guard position of a cestus gladiator. He shuffled forward, head down, jaw clenched.

Cipher flicked out his forehand, and Dovestrom twitched back, but immediately adjusted and closed. The monk's forward leg snapped out in a quick, easy kick, but Dovestrom raised his own shin to block it, wincing at the impact and staggering as he came down, but still advancing, now starting to swing. A flurry of blows was exchanged, with Cipher flowing and dodging while Dovestrom blocked with grunts.

Horm, eyes keen, watched, but called a palpable hit for neither one.

Dovestrom, bigger and with greater reach, kept the monk back but couldn't seem to land a jab or round swing. The monk darted in, back, never quite making a solid strike, and then as one they both seemed to decide on a clinch. Their arms entwined, they tilted one way, then the other, and it seemed that the larger man would overpower the monk and bear him to the ground. Then, with a move that looked deceptively easy, Cipher twined his legs around Dovestrom's thigh and rolled onto the turf, his weight sweeping across the hinge of Dovestrom's knee and sending the sergeant sprawling. In a trice, Cipher rolled on top and laced his hands into the nobleman's shirt collar.

"I think you're a bully," Cipher whispered into Dovestrom's ear. "I think you like being stronger than others, making them submit, breaking them to your will. I think that is your joy."

The other man couldn't reply. He was being strangled. He clutched at Cipher's hands, but he could no more break their grip than he could pulverize stones with his fingertips. He tried to fling the smaller man off him, but Cipher was like a limpet, seeming to easily guess Dovestrom's every twist and desperate turn.

"Halt!" Horm cried, then lunged in to seize the monk around the ribs and pull him back. Cipher released his hold so easily that Horm tumbled backwards, sitting heavily and then flopping to the turf, while Cipher did a tidy back somersault and got to his feet.

"You're right. It is a joy." He said it loud enough for everyone to hear.

He wasn't even breathing hard.

# # #

Cipher walked away then, into the woods and through them, until he came to a hill. There, he sat and stared at the sky.

He could remember things to do, things with his hands and his feet, things with a knife. But there was something else, something he knew how to do with his thoughts.

He stared at the sky, and through it, and calmed himself. His heartbeat began to slow.

The mastery of the body by the mind was the first step to mastery of the mind by the soul. He didn't remember learning this, but he knew it. His breathing became gentler, shallower. Something had changed his mind, some demon or god or sorcery, but he was more than his mind and his reflexes. He breathed in only a tiny sip of air, stilling the body, letting the spirit rise.

What was the shape of his mind? What was the mask, behind which his past hid? Words would not help him here. He let his heartbeat weaken, his mind pass from thought to dream to dreamlessness, probing for what had been taken. If his memories were gone, perhaps he could find the shape of the hole they had left.

His breath was nearly still. His heart had nearly stopped.

*There had been a city, proud and rich, and he traveled through it with the monks. A boy joined them there, younger than him. Soft. He had some fat on him, clear brown eyes, skin unmarked by the sun. His fingernails were perfect, and so were his teeth.*

His heart was still for some time, before giving one more lazy pulse.

*"You're exactly the kind of person who is best to rob," he said to the soft boy, who just looked back, eyes wide and afraid. He looked at everything that way, except the Master, who did not wish for his fear. If the Master smiled at you, it was almost impossible to resist smiling in return. All the monks around him bent to his moods and will, but not the soft boy and the lean one. They were not monks yet.*

*"I am going to name you Escape," the Abbott told the new child during the ceremony where his thick chestnut hair was shorn off and he exchanged his rich brocade clothing for a simple robe. What had the Abbott named him?*

His breath would not have made a single blade of grass flutter.

*They had called him 'The Master's Project,' and later, at a dinner of simple, wholesome foods, he had demanded to know why 'Escape' was crying.*

*"I miss my parents," the boy said.*

*"I never had parents," the Master's Project boasted. "They call me 'Project' but my name is really 'ꞑꞑꞑꞑ'."*

*"You're no elf. Why is your name the elvish word for 'Tool of Dishonor'?"*

*"That's not what it means! It's their word for 'Weapon'!"*



"None taken. But for all my forgetting, there's still a 'me' who forgot. That's what I want to be rid of."

"But why? What's so offensive about your... 'you'?"

"It's not offensive, it's just a barrier. It hides the real."

"Without a 'you' in you, what good is the real to you?"

For a while, they sat and stared in silence, one watching the stars, one watching the dark.

"Meditation is meant to clear away distractions like unhappiness and confusion and easy assumptions," he said. "When you go to track, is it not easier if you don't already think you know where your quarry is going?"

"No, I want to know where they're headed," she said. "Then I know where to start looking."

"You would probably make a poor monk."

They were silent for a while more.

"They say the Crusader has monks," she said. "Or... there are rumors. Worshippers of the Dark Gods, tucked away in mountains to train. To empty themselves so that only the will of their masters remains."

"That could be me," he said.

"If so, what happened to your memory? You weren't struck on the head," she said.

"Maybe I'm lying. Servants of the Dark aren't known for their honesty."

"Don't joke about such things."

"But how do you know if I'm telling the truth?"

"I guess I'll have to watch you," she said. "Are you done meditating?"

"I think so."

"You've figured it out?"

"Meditation isn't about quieting questions by finding answers. It's about quieting questions by ignoring answers."

"Why would you ignore answers?"

"Men are flawed," he said. "Our questions are flawed and therefore our answers are always false, at least a little bit. Meditation is meant to subsume me before the unknowable... if only for a while. Because, after all, to cease to be imperfect is to cease to be mortal."

"Doesn't sound like so bad a deal, if we're all broken."

"I meditate to forget my wounds for a while, my errors and absences. The more often I do it, the more quickly I can set aside doubts and fears and distractions. Some can do it in an eyeblink..."

"Then what?"

"Perfect action... walking on fire as if it was cool earth... knowing the enemy's attack before the enemy even decides... striking with the swift sureness that shatters stone... all manner of things. Surely you've heard of warrior monks and their miracles?"

"I've heard a lot of stories about a lot of things," she said, standing. "So much I don't need meditation to rinse them out. Shall we go?"

"Let's," he said, taking her hand and pulling himself to his feet. "I wasn't entirely sure how to find my way back."

# # #

Back to the muster house, Cipher saw that most of the bunks were empty.

"You're on no duty," she said, "But I recommend you get some rest. Tomorrow, if you act as deputy you'll see some toil indeed."

"Oh?"

"Tonight, she rides with Dovestrom and half our strength to rouse old Farnbarr and tell him his sons' fates. There's no love between that old sorcerer and the Emperor's law."

"Sorcerer?"

"They say he was fed dragon blood in his youth, that he might grow strong with magic. He's a wild one."

"And his sons? They had some conflict with... Lyridel, the old deputy?"

"That's a tale too long for bedtime, and not mine to tell. Get some rest."

# # #

He woke up tumbling, rolling out sideways and pivoting to his feet. Before his eyes and mind had cleared, he'd automatically wound his blanket around his arm as a makeshift shield and taken a fighting stance.

Horm, arm raised, looked nonplussed.

"I was about to wake you," he said.

"Ah." Cipher straightened up and uncoiled the blanket onto the bed.

"Next time, I think I'll just call out."

"Perhaps that's best."

"Were you asleep? I mean, soundly out?" The sergeant's head was quizzically tilted.

"I, uh, was, yes."

"Then how did you know I was about to touch your shoulder?"

"I could not say, sir."

"You needn't call me sir, 'Horm' is well-sufficient. Breakfast mash awaits. I let you sleep in a bit."

"Thanks." Cipher hurriedly washed his face and put on his only other robe.

He was facing a bowl of cornmeal muck and a mug of hot, bitter tea when Gruttla trudged into the hall, eyes bagged with weariness and hair plastered down with sweat. She was still in her armor.

"No breakfast ale today," Gruttla said to the table attendant, "Tea only."

Surprised, the servant nodded and cleared off the commander's morning mug (crafted from a goblin skull instead of the full-sized ogre-skull dinner goblet), then hustled off to fetch provender. As other weary soldiers began to enter and eat, Cipher asked what had happened with the sorcerer.

"Fled," Tark said, disgusted. "We'll be watching our back for that one."

On her way out of the dining hall, Gruttla paused by their table and blinked slowly at Cipher.

"No word on you yet," she said, "And I'm for a lie down before I fall down. You... um, you're at your leisure."

"Very good," Cipher muttered in response. "I hope you sleep well."

She smiled back. "Exhaustion's no exciting bedmate, but is a comfortable one."

# # #

Horm found him an hour later, hanging a freshly-laundered robe on the line beside two dripping loincloths.

"How are your shoulders?" the sergeant asked.

"Stiff, but on the mend."

"Aye, those potions," Horm said, idly glancing over towards the stables.

"You'd think they could take all the pain, as well. Like a holy touch."

"I suppose that's the difference between the medicine of the Gods and the medicines of mortals."

"You a godly man then, brother?"

"It would seem so," Cipher said, indicating his tonsure.

"Surely you know by your heart more than your hair?"

"Wish it were so."

"I respect gods as much as is respectable," Horm said with no irony. "The Bright ones anyhow."

"Of course."

"But I can't have with all that praising all day and night. If they're so great and I'm so wee, why would they care aught for my admiration?"

"One argument is that worshipping them helps them not at all, but burnishes the soul of him that prays," Cipher said, falling in with Horm as the sergeant began to walk.

"Hmph. I'd rather burnish my soul with deeds, and leave the pestering of heaven to prettier voices. You want to see our prison?"

Cipher had already familiarized himself with the guard towers, the armory and the farriers, but now (apparently) the soldiers trusted him enough to take him to the heart of the muster house.

"Coming up!" Horm called, and was rewarded by footsteps as another armed guard—this one with a crossbow—came down to unlock the metal bars between the lower level and the jail.

"There's a variety of keys for the top and bottom, you'll learn who has what when the time comes. Mostly, we're trying to keep the prisoners close, and contained." The steps were so narrow that they had to squeeze past the guard chest to chest. There was a right turn halfway up, and a stout partition with a small bench behind it.

"How goes the watch?" Horm asked the guard.

"All quiet, save for the weeping." As he mentioned it, Cipher started to hear a muffled, heartbroken chirp.

After opening another fortified grating at the top, Cipher and Horm entered a narrow passage between eight cells.

"Prisoners usually get a room to themselves... we only hold those whose crimes are serious enough that Gruttla can't send them off with a fine and a flog," Horm said. "With your catch yesterday, we hold four testing the patience of the Emperor's axe."

The first cell on the left was empty. A thin, horizontal window gave its only light, about six feet above the floor. The outside wall was thick wood, while mortared stone separated it from the next enclosure. The mattress was the same type Cipher had.

On the right, an identical room held Amblard the alchemist. He was curled in the corner, the source of the sobbing.

"What ho, Amblard?" Horm said, but got no answer.

"Can you not stop his pitiful mewling?" came a rough voice from the other side of Amblard's stone wall. Stepping closer, Cipher saw a man of the north, pale and muscular and wreathed in veins. His arms looked like maps of deltas, only each stream was the scar of a defensive wound. His hands were as marked and gnarled, and his face... it had been handsome, once, but now looked as if the skull had been smashed and reassembled a little crooked.

"I thought weeping was music to your tribe, Karvak," Horm said, and Cipher noticed the sergeant didn't get too close to the bars.

"Only the tears of foemen and goblins," Karvak said, contemptuously. "Were it you sobbing like a child, that would please me."

Horm laughed, then turned to Cipher. "Karvak here had a falling-out in Pibor's and punched a man right into death with one strike."

Karvak gave a dismissive snort. "He was a city man, unweathered and fine. I could have laughed him to death. Who is this one beside you?"

"We don't know," Horm said. "Do you recognize him?"

"He stinks not of horse-flesh and looks like he could deal a blow worth the name. What is your name and your father's name, stranger?"

Cipher shrugged.

Karvak seemed to approve. "You're not of the north, but you keep your name close. That's wise. Stay out of my path and I'll work you no ill."

"Thank you," Cipher said.

Horm's aspect lightened as they moved along to the next prisoner, a tidy gnome with a silvered beard and ponytail. He was blowing on a hollowed-out pork bone and, as they watched, he cocked his head and ground it against the stone wall for five or six vigorous strokes. Then he blew it again.

"Sergeant Horm," he said, in a pleasant tenor. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Berry here is the most skilled thief in the county," Horm said.

"Patently untrue!" Berry said. "If I were a thief, which I shall deny until my final breath, modesty would still compel me to defy your statement." A small pile of pork ribs of varying lengths lay at his feet, lined up like a pan pipe. He tooted one, nodded, and replaced it. "For even had I committed all the thefts that have been calumniously laid at my feet, I am still mouldering here. A truly skilled thief would avoid persecution and, indeed, all suspicion!"

"Don't let him fool you," Horm warned. "He could steal the beard off a dwarven wizard."

The prisoner, in reply, blew each pipe in turn and then set them gently aside.

"Where'd you get the bones, Berry?"

"Would you believe I found them in my pallet?" he said. "Truly remarkable! I wondered what it might be that was poking my nethers and, behold, the remnants of someone's midnight rib snack." He held up his hands, eloquently suggesting amazement at the absurdities of the world.

"That's contraband, you know," Horm said, hands on hips.

"Oh, let the runtling have his whistle!" Karvak cried. "If for naught else than to drown out the maundering snivels from my other side!"

"Watch this one closely," Horm told Cipher. "This is not his first durance here. He's the reason our guests have a guard at the stair-turn all day and night through."

"It is the imperative of mortal life to seek freedom," Berry intoned. "One cannot blame prisoners for seeking unshacklement. It's a fundamental principle of Imperial justice."

"But not of the Dark Gods," Horm said, and his scar made his smile look, briefly, malevolent. "Berry *claims* to have escaped from Rivernaught as well."

"Do you see how eagerly he impugns my honesty?" Berry cried to Cipher. "Were not these bars between us, Horm, I'd strike you with a glove and demand the satisfaction of a duel, if I had a glove."

"No escaping, Berry. If we catch you at it, we might just give you back to Rivernaught."

The bantering brightness dropped, slowly, off the gnome's face, and for just a moment his eyes were hard.

"You wrong me." His voice was quiet. "Now pardon me, these pipes won't bind themselves." He began to pick at loose threads on his trousers, pulling them out and laying them neatly aside.

"What is Rivernaught?" Cipher whispered to Horm.

"The Crusader's local fort," the soldier replied. "Now watch yourself with this next one, she's foul."

As soon as they stepped into view, the fourth cell's chamber pot flew against the bars with a clatter.

"Devils eat your eyes, old hag!" Karvak cried. "Those have lids for a reason! We'll smell it all the night!"

"Better than your man-reek, northern wretch!" a high, grating voice replied. A tiny woman in a filthy black dress rushed the bars and spat at her captors, giving Cipher a glance at one mad blue eye and one dry socket. Her hair was wild and greying, falling in her face, and her teeth were as filthy and twisted as the perverse suggestions she spewed at Cipher, at Horm, and at Karvak.

"Our mad madame necromancer, Figlit," Horm said. "Imprisoned for crimes against the hereafter."

"The Dead King will gnaw your souls!" she screamed at them. "I am a bride of the grave! Your disrespect shall be expiated thousandfold!"

"Cease your prattle!" Karvak bellowed.

"I am beloved by the Lord of the Crypt, I am his implement, I was forged in the icy flames of..."

"Ugh, ask him why he put your head right at kicking height then," Horm said, rattling her bars. "Come, let's depart," he said to Cipher, raising his voice to add "Out into the sunshine and open air where we may wander at our will."

This provoked a chorus of curses from Karvak and Figlit, and more sobs from Amblard. Horm only paused once, outside Berry's cell.

"Do not let her touch those bones," he said.

"I'm no fool," Berry replied.

# # #

The next day, the Imperial Post rider came to the town of Belton's Hill, and Dovestrom told Cipher he was going to come along to fetch it.

"Perhaps someone in the town knows your face," Dovestrom said. "Or mayhap it will appear on the new watch-for pages."

Dovestrom's eyes were narrow at first as he watched Cipher try to saddle a horse, then started rolling.

"Cinch the girth *thus*, you truly are ignorant of the mounted arts."

"A little less so now, I hope," Cipher said through gritted teeth.

"Hmph. If you're to stay with us, study quickly." For all his impatience, Dovestrom explained what he was doing and why as he fitted the bit and adjusted the stirrups. "You've strong arms—well I know it!—but use no force on the reins. Steadiness, ease... these are the marks of a good rider."

The monk made an effort to relax himself into the saddle, but discomfort still showed in his posture as Dovestrom had him take the lead down the road.

"Brought your knife, did you?" Dovestrom said, seeing it poking from the back of Cipher's rope belt.

"I might have to open a knotted sack."

"Hah!" Dovestrom gave a light tap with his heels and caught up. "We're coming to a flat stretch of road, let's put you in a gallop."

"Please no."

"We'll be all day at this rate, take her up to a trot at least."

Under Dovestrom's instruction, Cipher urged the horse forward.

"Stand up in the stirrups, just a bit, cushion the beats with your knees!"

Dovestrom called, and Cipher obeyed. "All right, gently pull back on the reins... good. We'll go along this turn here at a walk. What did you think?"

"I feel bad for the horse and worse for myself," Cipher grumbled.

"Well, you're hardly dressed for mounting," Dovestrom admitted. "In town, we'll fetch you something more proper to wear."

"I've no money to pay for it," Cipher said.

"Mph. I have."

# # #

Cipher looked at the pages delivered for the muster house from every end of the Empire, slowly sounding out the words on them.

"Dur... rand... Elf... ins... peety?"

"Durand Elfinspite," Dovestrom said. "Not you."

The pages from the dwarves were stark white, pulped from tree roots underground, smelling vaguely of mushrooms and the coal and rust used in the ink. They were struck through some mechanical press, names and crimes spelled out in rigid, repetitive runes. The notes from the men of the surface bore portraits of pirates, death-cultists and false-wivers painted in sepia by oracular artists whose brushes were enchanted to move a thousand others in mimicry, creating multiple copies on yellower papyrus held steady (with general success) by legions of scribes who then hand-lettered the deeds and aliases, the rewards and identifying marks. As for the posters from the elves, they were made by painting and writing on a single plane of wood with spores from variously-colored fungi, which were pressed onto thick parchment and sealed with resinous sap.

None of them, however, showed a picture of a man in his twenties with monastic hair, beggar's teeth, and weaponized hands.

"Next week, perhaps, someone will miss you," Dovestrom said, not meeting the monk's eyes but giving him a clap on the shoulder. A stranger might have said it was companionable.

The town of Belton's Hill was a busy one, big enough to host a tavern and support a distillery on its outskirts, and to have a market square bustling every

day. It was a crisp spring day, and farmers adorned early produce with boughs of flowers, bound in fragrant vines.

"Slirma the weaver does the best work," Dovestrom said, catching a fat strawberry tossed to him, with a greeting, by a grey-haired woman in a straw hat. "Nothing fancy, not out here, but we can get you some trousers and a couple tunics..."

His voice trailed off, and not just because he was sucking strawberry juice from his fingers. He was staring.

Cipher looked and saw three warriors in black breastplates over blood-red tunics, helmets tucked under arms. They had sweeping cloaks like bat wings, crimson-lined. Each carried an arming sword in a shoulder sheath and a dagger at the left hip. All their gear was black iron, the surfaces marked with peculiar kinked whorls and angles. Their daggers each had a ring on the pommel.

"Lackeys of the Crusader," Dovestrom said, nostrils flaring as he stalked forward. "Follow my lead."

Closer up, each could be seen to bear a black armband with a red, mailed fist on it. Two, a woman and a man, sneered as Dovestrom neared, one going so far as to put his pointed iron cap back on his head, though with its snarling face-mask still raised. The third gave an easy smile under a greying mustache, his teeth clean but slightly crooked. Unlike the others, his helm had a plume and his breastplate had a single flame enameled over his heart.

"Sergeant, isn't it?" he said, his voice low and raspy but with a touch of play in it. "From the Imperial garrison... Develin? Devestorm?"

"Dovestrom," the cavalry soldier said, looking at the other's extended hand but not shaking it. "You have me at the advantage."

"Captain Grossthorn. Pleased to meet you. I'd say 'at your service' but those to whom I've pledged fealty take easy offense."

"Even when it's a meaningless pleasantry? I thought the Dark Gods favored falsehood."

"Some more than others. My personal lord and master prides himself on... indisputable truth."

As when he'd first met Cipher, Dovestrom was now close to the other man, unpleasantly so.

"What sort of a name is Grossthorn, anyhow?"

"It's the captain's name," said the helmeted subordinate, flipping down his war-mask.

"At your ease," Grossthorn said, gesturing for his followers to step back. They had room for it: As Dovestrom had approached, the townsfolk had gradually retreated, with the exception of the cobbler whose home and workplace had attracted the trio's attention. (Before Dovestrom, the captain had been examining a pair of bedroom slippers.)

"Did your mother look in your crib and say, 'Ah, this prick deserves the name of thorn, so gross is he'? Or is it a family name?"

"It is a name of initiation." Grossthorn's eyes seemed to glitter red for a moment, like embers in a fire that just wants breath to blaze forth renewed. But with a blink and a sardonic smile, they seemed to be once more a pedestrian brown. "One cannot fault a god for having a sense of drama."

"Hmph. You can be called 'Pudding-Pate' for all I care," Dovestrom said. "I have a few questions for you."

"Certainly. It's always amusing... I mean, always a *pleasure* to speak with those whose swords are pledged to that charming mortal monarch."

"Are any of your troops from Rivernaught missing?"

"Missing? No."

"You don't recall any who walked off the job recently?"

"One does not simply 'walk off' a pledged duty to the Crusader," Grossthorn sniffed. "We face the forces of hell as equals: While there are many challenges to our enterprise, cowardice is not one of them."

"Sure it isn't..."

"Restrain your envy, Emperor's man," the woman said, in a thin and uneven voice. "Oaths to *our* masters, and to the Crusader their priest in this realm, are no light things."

"But you've no unexplained absences? It needn't be a man under arms, it could be a servant or associate..."

"For menial tasks, we bind the spawn of the Abyss itself. Why do you ask?"

"Part of a magistrate's investigation," Dovestrom said. "Do you mind if I see your dagger there?"

Wordlessly, the captain drew it and handed it over, hilt-first. A leather thong, thin like a bootlace, was knotted around the pommel-ring.

"Nice balance," the sergeant grudgingly admitted.

"Iron is easy to monger for those whose blood and breath is furnace-fire," the captain replied. "We call them *nyth sretotog*, which, in your language would be... mm, coarsely translated as 'doom bleeders.' Once disciplined, they make all our metal gear."

"Do weapons ever go missing?"

"About as often as soldiers fall in fight," Grossthorn said. "So... more often than we'd prefer."

"This ring on the end, the strap... can you explain its purpose?"

Grossthorn looped his thumb through the thong and deftly twisted his wrist. The blade twirled around and slapped into his palm. "Now it's harder to lose, harder to take away," he said. He opened his hand and it dropped out, dangling. Then he laced his fingers a different way and clenched his fist, leaving the dagger almost tied in a stabbing grip. "Some like it thus, saying it spreads the force more evenly through the hand." He shrugged and put it away.

"What about pilferage?" Dovestrom persisted. "I doubt many locals have tried to enter Rivernaught with light fingers."

"There was the one, but he didn't get far," the captain said. "He wasn't stealing weapons, however. Why do you ask? Specifically, that is: I'd like more than 'it's pertinent to a magistrate's inquiries'."

"Just bear with me a little longer," Dovestrom said. "Your... Dark Gods. Are there monasteries to them?"

"The Emperor has forbidden such things!" Grossthorn smirked. "Just as he has forbidden cemetery cults, forbade the northern orcs to pester his borders, forbidden theft and adultery..."

"Bandy words with me as you will, but do not mock my Emperor. If you understand loyalty, you know dogs bite when their master is taunted."

Grossthorn took a half step back, not breaking from Dovestrom's gaze but aware that the other man's hand was on his sword-hilt, while both his own troops had helmets on, masks down.

"Well said," Grossthorn said. "But I know little of monasteries."

Dovestrom snorted, then turned. "I ask on behalf of this man, whom we call 'Brother Cipher,' for he..."

The sergeant trailed off in confusion, looking at the empty space behind him, while the masked warriors began to chortle softly.

Then a piercing scream sounded in the distance, followed by voices of outrage, and Dovestrom broke into a run.

# # #

As soon as he'd seen the soldiers in black, the ignorance that clouded Cipher's mind had fluttered, and when the one with the plume had turned, Cipher felt a moment of recognition.

*"Take the knife," the Captain said, holding it out. "I'd wish for you to never need it, but that's not a prayer my god would answer. Besides, I wouldn't mean it."*

*He'd taken the dagger, the sheath, and placed them in his satchel without another word.*

*"The gods play their games," the Captain said. "Some of us are pawns, others are pieces of great utility, but most are simply scenery, decorations on the gaming-board. You though... you lucky man," he said with a snicker. "You get to be one of the dice in their cup. They are shaking you now, and who can say what face you will show when you fall?"*

Then the curtain was drawn and, without really considering it, Cipher had used his lightest step to move away, around a corner, and out of sight.

He'd moved, quickly but quietly, across two more streets before he happened to see something especially interesting.

# # #

“Make way! Magistrate’s man, make way!” Dovestrom bellowed in a well-practiced voice. He’d instinctively mounted his steed, and the powerful animal pressed forward as he smacked heads with his sheathed saber to loosen the clotted crowd.

He started swearing as he got close enough to see above their heads. An elderly woman in grey robes was kneeling in the street, keening, bleeding from her side. Two young men—the smith’s apprentice and a husky farmhand, Dovestrom knew them both—were attempting to restrain Cipher, with about as much success as a child trying to capture fog in a cup.

“Cipher, stand down!” Dovestrom howled as the monk wove away from the blacksmith’s grasp, ducked under the the farmer’s blow, and rolled at a runner’s pace towards the fallen old lady. The black knife was out, and bloody.

Dovestrom found that his saber was bare, and he spurred his horse into a lunge.

“It’s her!” Cipher cried, pawing down her beseeching arms with his left hand and slicing across the woman’s forehead with his right. Dovestrom raised his sword, guiding his steed and seeing in his mind how the blade would sweep down and across and through the monk’s body...

Then the woman stood up, lifting her attacker with one arm. She rose and kept rising, driving the top of Cipher’s head into the underside of the horse’s jaw, hard enough to knock the animal down.

She was ten feet tall, the old woman’s ragged long dress now hanging above her knees and tight around her hips and shoulders. It was Hetricia Thurlby.

“I just wanted some produce you FOUL MONASTIC MEDDLER!”

Dovestrom had leaped free of his knocked-down horse, but he was still off balance when she hurled Cipher at him. The two men fell in a tumble as she charged the crowd, which started to scream even as she shrank and changed, trying to join them.

“Are you hale?” Dovestrom gasped, wiggling free and standing.

“...dizzy...” Cipher said, blinking and clutching his head.

“Run it off,” Dovestrom said. His steed had staggered upright, and he seized its reins, then stared into its eyes.

“Shh, good, good,” he said. “We must chase.”

The horse whickered, and Dovestrom slung himself into the saddle without ever letting go of his sword.

He charged off after the crowd, but it was dispersing, fleeing in all directions. He scanned, trying to find any woman in a bloodstained black dress, but the first thing to catch his eye was knot of people, clustered by the mouth of an alley, looking in and down.

“Move aside, move... what happened?”

A whey-faced, middle-aged woman was face down beside a barrel of rubbish. She’d been stripped to her shift and petticoats, and a black dress was crumpled beside her.

"A giant ran up, punched 'er, den jerked 'er dress right off!"

"Clear off you lot!" Dovestrom dismounted and checked the woman's pulse. "What was she wearing?"

"Dat black dress right dere."

"No, I mean... what is she wearing *now*?"

"Dat other woman's dress."

"What does that look like?"

"Um... 's a dress... brown, or maybe blue... long skirt? Some kinder sleeves?"

"Right." Dovestrom pulled a potion bottle from his pocket and dumped it between the woman's lips. As she sputtered and sat up, he remounted and charged away. "Cipher!" he called, returning to where he'd left his companion, "I need you to..."

But he could say no more. The monk was sprawled in the dust, bleeding and still, a heavy stone beside his broken skull.

# # #

As he came back to consciousness, Cipher groaned, and then whimpered a little.

"Shalt live," said a voice clear and pure as a winter wind, and just as consoling. "'Tis but ye phantom pains where my finest healing draught has acted."

"Once," Cipher said, "I woke up because I'd fallen asleep. I remember that with great fondness, and hope it will not be a singular event."

He opened his eyes and found himself lying on a floor, atop what he recognized by feel as a rather nice cloak—wool of tight weave, with a strip of something slippery soft and smooth where it would touch the neck. It was now, however, crusted and sticky.

"I assume this is blood is mine?" He gingerly sat up.

"I did not want it fouling my rugs." The speaker had a thick elvish accent, alien in the monk's ears.

He was in a small, elegant home, the aforementioned carpets atop waxed wood, a fire burning in a small hearth that somehow managed to be more stately than cozy, with tables of peculiar implements fighting for space with cases full of books and scrolls.

An elvish man stared down at him, as if he was a stain that no scrubbing would remove. His cheekbones were astonishingly high and, while Cipher had seen pointed ears and chins among elves, this one's angularity surpassed them all. His eyes were bright violet, and his hair was blond like straw in a drought. He wore fine boots of eelskin with pointed toes, flared trousers with a vertical line of brass buttons above the ankle, and a matching coat of midnight blue, brass again at its wide cuffs. His shirt was white linen with a generous froth of lace at the throat, held in place with an opal pin. He accessorized with an elaborate

silver nail guard encasing and lengthening his already spindly left forefinger, and a golden belt that seemed to have glittering black flecks floating just beneath the surface. An unadorned willow wand, tucked through the belt where a courtier might place a fan, completed the picture.

"Sorry if I troubled you, magician," Cipher said.

"My trouble was with ye sergeant, not thou. Canst stand?"

Cipher did. "You have my thanks for the healing."

"Lord Dovestrom staggered a' my abode, bearing thy broken frame, and without a word o' courtesy begged my aid while he hared off after Hetricia ye giantess."

Cipher groaned.

"How he thinks a' find her is quite beyond me," the elf continued.

"I should have told him. It's the ground, it's just firm enough... she can change her shape but not her weight."

The elf twisted his head to peer more closely at the monk. "Explain."

"Look, let's say a regular five-foot human weighs fifty logs," he said, laying his hand on a lead weight calibrated to the "half-log" Imperial standard. "So if she's twice as tall, that's a hundred logs. Twice as wide? Two hundred. Twice as thick too? Four hundred logs of weight, on normal human feet. On mud, she'd sink pretty deep, but these conditions, no... the ground's firm enough that normal people don't leave good prints, but our horses did. That's how I noticed... and I saw one set of footprints, bare, in the dirt. Followed it to her."

"And then she did crack thee thy skull?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What quarrel hast thou with ye Thurlby sisters? Lo, they are no light foes."

"They stole something from me, a silver..." Cipher's eyes widened. "It looked like that!"

He was pointing to a book upon the shelf, its leather spine chased in swirling, angles.

"Interesting," the elf said. "'Tis a tome in ~~an old~~ the language of the Bright Gods."

"I had a silver cask with that language upon it," Cipher said. "The sisters took it."

"Where didst thou acquire such a thing?"

"I don't know," he confessed, then explained his lost memories.

"So... Gruttla Hammerheart hast sheltered thee under her wing?" the wizard said. Cipher squinted, for even through the accent it was clear to hear that there was much going on in the enchanter's heart and mind when he spoke Gruttla's name.

"You know the commander?"

"Well."

"Should I trust her?"

The wizard turned away, and his shrug conveyed slight petulance. "Why trust me on matters o' trust? Thou knowst not even my name."

"Lyridel, I reckon."

He turned back. "Do they speak o' me o'ermuch a' the muster house?"

"No, very little. They speak around you 'o'ermuch'. But how many elvish wizards can this small town accommodate?"

"True enough. Gruttla is well?"

"Weary. Up all night chasing someone called Farnbarr after killing his sons."

"What?" The elf's eyes sharpened, as the silver nail-cover rose to caress his thin lips. "Farnbarr's boys, both dead?"

"That's what they said," Cipher replied.

At that moment, a knock came at the door. When Lyridel opened it, Dovestrom was there. He immediately looked down at his feet.

"Lyridel," he said. "Sorry. I used my only health draught on another victim. Thank you for... watching this one for me. "

"You speak as if he were thy child." Lyridel glared, frowning.

"With his mind askew, it's... well, we ought go. I hope we did not, um... disturb..."

"You did," Lyridel said, picking the cloak off the floor. With a sigh, he muttered and crooked his silver-clad finger at it. "~~W-~~W~~-~~W~~-~~W~~-~~W~~~~," he intoned, and the dried blood and stains sprang off it into clouds of dust, which swirled themselves into the fire with a brief flare of sparks. "This cloak is thy favorite, is it not?"

"Yes," Dovestrom said quietly, still not meeting his eye. "Cipher if... if you're ready to go, I should alert the muster house. I regret that we can't get those clothes I promised you..."

"I should like this 'Cipher' to stay with me," Lyridel said crisply. "If 'tis garb he needs, I can supply. Perhaps I can address this lackwit curse under which he seems to labor."

"Oh... I couldn't ask you..." Dovestrom said.

"'Tis not for thee," the magician replied.

"Besides," Cipher said, "I'm still sore... I'd only slow you down."

"How did you pierce Hetricia's disguise?" the sergeant asked. His whole face seemed to become more round with surprise as the other man explained.

"That is... why didn't I think of that?"

Cipher shrugged.

"Well, your mount is tied here. Ride back to the watch-house when you're ready. Good luck with... er, recalling yourself."

# # #

At Slirma's home and store, Cipher noted the stiff formality with which the gnomish weaver addressed the elf, a touch of reserve—suspicion, even?—that cast a shadow over her dealings with the monk himself. But he nonetheless

acquired cotton tunics of grey, black, russet and a subtle lavender that the elf insisted would “soften his features.” To accompany them he was also given a small quantity of grey, brown and undyed cotton trousers.

“Shouldst shave thy scalp entire as well,” Lyridel added, “As ‘tis, thy head resembles aught so much as a grubby mushroom.”

“I’ll consider it.” Cipher waited until the wizard had paid for the clothing before he asked, “What’s between you and Dovestrom?”

“What makes thee think...”

“Oh please,” Cipher said, following him out of the shop. “He won’t meet your eyes and you glare daggers at him. It’s not dislike, not from him: I’ve seen how he treats those he suspects. I’d guess that he feels he’s wronged you, or failed you somehow.”

“La, I could not possibly care enough a’ that man for him to offend me. He is, forgive me, typical of his type—proud, inflexible and curiously determined to defend his parochialism!”

“Your voice rises,” Cipher observed. “You show a little flush. This seems, if you’ll forgive me, a curious way to not possibly care.”

“Who art thou, human, a’ comment upon me? I wielded eldritch powers when thy father was still an itch ‘neath thy grandam’s belt buckle!”

Cipher shrugged. “That seems likely.”

“Indeed, and shalt be wreaking enchantment when thy toothless and elderered corpse molders forgotten i’ the soil.”

“Not to mention Dovestrom’s.”

The elf gave a hiss of ire. “Art curiously vulgar and froward, monk, a’ one who has gifted thee garments and promises a’ tidy thy addled brains.”

“I think you like solving puzzles,” Cipher said.

“I’ve had my fill of mysteries standing beside Gruttla while ye denizens of this rural backwater scabble to steal one another’s paltry goods, grope one another’s wretched spouses, and shorten one another’s already too-brief lives. Nay, if I’m to toil over thy curse, I would be repaid.”

“A mercenary then?”

“If you like.” They’d arrived at the wizard’s home, and he muttered at it with the queer resonances of magic before the door opened of its own accord.

“And a gambler?”

One blonde, thin eyebrow rose. “I’ve been known a’ tumble and toss a pair.”

“I heard.” Cipher smiled. “I would think a wise man would not dice with a magus.”

“You ought not fear gambling with magi o’ermuch. ‘Tis a fool wizard who is cavalier with the domain o’ ye gods of chance. What is thy wager?”

“I know nothing of my past,” Cipher said. “I could be rich or poor.”

“Art poor,” the wizard said, in tones of great authority. “Thou hast ye look. Ill-breeding and coarseness infect every syllable that passeth thy lips.”

“Going solely by numbers, that is the wise wager,” Cipher said. “But I did own a fine silver cask. Not to mention this dagger.”

“A bagatelle o’ ye Crusader,” Lyridel said. “Think’ee that thou walked ‘neath his banner?”

“I hope not. My oldest friend Gruttla seems to dislike the notion.”

“‘Oldest friend.’” Lyridel turned and pulled up a tall, straight-backed chair.

“It’s true,” Cipher protested. “You have a thousand memories—childhood days, family fights, loves, envies, horrors and delights. I have... yesterday. Battling the Thurlby giants is the worst thing I have ever experienced. Meeting Gruttla, Horm and Tark? That is the best.”

“Dovestrom is a notable exclusion from thy list,” Lyridel said, leading him to the seat.

“We fought.”

“Oh aye?”

“I may have choked him a little.”

“But a little? Thou art a forbearing man. I doubt ye Crusader has great use for such.” Lyridel tipped up Cipher’s chin, had the monk open his mouth, then made some show of recoiling from Cipher’s breath. “What o’ thy wager?”

“Half I own, should you restore my mind,” Cipher said.

The elf’s laugh was surprisingly jolly.

“Boldly said, but if thou art a pauper?”

“More misfortune for us both. But if I am rich, ah, what a score for you!”

“I greatly doubt thy wealth.”

“Well, if you can’t do it, that’s a shame. I’ll go tell Dovestrom you disappointed me...”

“Sit.” Lyridel turned back to his table and began grinding up a mixture of blue cobalt and something that smelled like bacon grease. Soon, he was daubing glyphs onto the monk’s face and scalp. He frowned, then cleaned his hands with the same incantation he’d used on Dovestrom’s cloak.

“That’s awful handy,” Cipher said. “My old robes are simply stiff with blood...”

“Hush.” The magician pulled a book from his shelf, paged through it and nodded. Then he reached a jar down and pulled its cork.

“Put this under thy tongue,” he instructed.

“What is...?”

Lyridel made an impatient face and flared his tiny nostrils. “A scorpion of ye Red Wastes, encased i’ copper, ‘tis is a *commonplace implement* for detecting thaumaturgical... just put it ‘neath thy tongue.”

With his client’s mouth indisposed, Lyridel pattered about his lab, placing a stuffed lizard in Cipher’s hands, nodding and taking it away, consulting a compass and a sundial, nodding, then opening a high shelf without touching it, simply by gesturing with his silvered finger.

“So far I have ruled out brain vapors o’ ye chaos imp, residual mandragora fever, Koru hypnosis, Feddington’s Mischief and river nymph bewitchment,” he



"There are innumerable ways a' break curses," the elf replied. "Alack, 'tis different each time. This one might 'scape fate by flossing with unicorn mane, another by eating a full set o' armor..."

"All these involve consumption," Cipher said, leaning in. "Is that what it takes? To... to unlock the jaws of my mind?"

"Nay." Lyridel scowled and strode off towards a far door. "I hunger."

The wizard helped himself to a salad of dandelion leaves and cherry tomatoes with a light dusting of salt. He didn't offer any to Cipher.

"A' the rug," Lyridel said when he finished, gesturing with the wand as, with a rap of his silver finger against a table, candles swept through the air to surround the monk, four white ones in front and a grey one behind. With muttered invocations, sparks spat from wand and nail guard to ignite them. "Shalt see if we cannot a' least, find a task for thy spell's undoing."

Cipher obeyed, closing his eyes and wincing.

"Now," Lyridel said, color high and mouth set, "~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~!"

The room around him went black as Cipher's eyes darkened to the present, as the sounds of the current day were snuffed out, as the sense of his body evaporated...

*The woman with the scarred arms was called Arquith. The boy once made the mistake of assuming that was her name, but she clarified that he was not to know her name, but only call her Arquith. She made that point quite forcefully.*

*For the first time in his life, the boy was adequately fed and housed in reliable warmth. Winters had always been sad times with Hatchet's gang. If you were one of the favorites, you got to be in the middle of the room, where everyone else served as your blanket. The ones on the rim rarely died in the night, but it happened. Especially to the ill. Hatchet didn't believe in coddling the sickly.*

*But no matter Hatchet's esteem, some urchins just didn't come back. The younger ones believed their parents found them, and perhaps that even happened. But by the time the boy left, he knew that it was far more likely that they'd gotten hurt and immobilized and froze before they could get to a barrel fire. Or they'd been scooped up by the authorities for doing something too stupid to ignore. Or they'd just been killed.*

"Try to lift a wizard's purse?" Hatchet called.

"You might die from wizard curse!" the children chorused in return. Not that everyone who looked like a wizard was one, and nor did every genuine magus advertise the fact.

*So the boy was, all told, glad Arquith purchased him. Food and lodging are powerful bribes to one who hasn't had enough of either. He might have come to love her if everything else hadn't been so dreadful.*

"The knife," she said, "Is no tool for the amateur killer. I've seen a half-orc stabbed thirty-three times by a wood sprite before finally breaking its neck. Being stabbed won't kill you."

*Then she stabbed him.*

*"Don't squeal!" she exclaimed. "That was a shoulder, that's nothing, on a real mission that undisciplined cry is more likely to end you than a butterfinger scratch like that. I'll give you that one bit of whinging because you're young and unshaped, but after this, any complaining? You'll earn something to really cry about."*

*She looked at him. He nodded.*

*"The reason so many people survive stabbings is that few really want to stab killingly, so they never learn how. They hit shallow. They let the target block." Here she gave a wintry grin and raised her own forearms. "If you want a killing stab, you need a blade that is long, and thin, and very sharp at the tip. A stiletto."*

*The boy nodded and pointed. He used his left hand, because his right was busy clamping on the blood of his stabbed left shoulder.*

*"Right, that's the stiletto. Good. To finish someone with it, you have to hit the heart or the brain. You have to drive deep. You have to avoid getting it caught on any bones. You have to strike from the shoulder. You have to push with your hips."*

*She bandaged his arm and they spent the rest of the afternoon with a straw dummy, stabbing, striking from the shoulder, pushing with the hips. After an hour with his right hand, she made him do left. He tried not to cry out with the pain of each attack. He succeeded almost every time.*

*Other days were spent learning how to conserve his strength, slicing the arms again and again to bleed and weaken a victim before delivering a finishing stroke. He learned how to hamstring, and how to deliver an agonizing stab to the belly if you felt someone was being less than truthful with you. In passing, he learned how to spot a liar, how to deal with a pickpocket, how to recognize a false coin.*

*When Arquith had decided his stabbing was "not entirely hopeless," when he knew three paths to the brain and three to the heart, she switched to a short-bladed knife with a single keen edge.*

*"Cutting," she said, "is a different matter. You can cut arm-strings and tendons with a stiletto if you're swift and you mean it, but it's easier with a trimming knife like this one. These are built to disembowel." She taught him the transverse cut that spills a man's guts, and where to stand to get the best throat-slitting angle, and how to bleed a man out through his underarms or the insides of his thighs.*

*He never asked why she was teaching him to kill and she never explained it.*

*"Ggggh!" Cipher choked, convulsing forward as his teeth clamped on his own lips, as blood cascaded from his nose in a violent spray. The flames on the candles blazed a foot high, liquefying the wax instantly and then snuffing out. Lyridel cried out as the wand in his hand quivered and then shattered. The whole day seemed to go dark, not as if a cloud had passed the sun but as if all*

light and color had briefly cowered away from something older and more powerful.

Then it passed, leaving Lyridel staring dumbly at his broken wand and Cipher stanching this bloody nose.

"I think," the wizard said, "Thou shalt keep both halves o' thy fortune."

"No," Cipher panted, drooling gore. "I saw something! An elf, her name was... was Arquith. Wait, that wasn't her name, she was just called that..."

"Sounds near enou' to our word ~~Elves~~, for elves who defy ye word o' the Great Queen."

"I was in... in a city, I can't remember it's name. Ah, it's all fading like a dream when you wake." The monk uttered an ear-shriveling soupçon of blasphemy. "Whatever that was, you must do it again! Re-cast the spell!"

"Nay, I'll not risk engaging a curse o' that potency again. Besides, my mystic might is expended for the day..."

"Tomorrow then! I got a piece of it, I can... I can bring paper and have someone take notes..."

"Human," the elf said sternly, "We 'scaped with our lives due in main to luck. If that curse is o' the worst nature, as it shows every sign of being, it learns and adapts. I've lost my grand-dam's fine shew-nut diadem and a handsome wand o' Bronze River willow. The next thing broken could be my skull. Like any half-decent gambler, I am quitting while I can."