



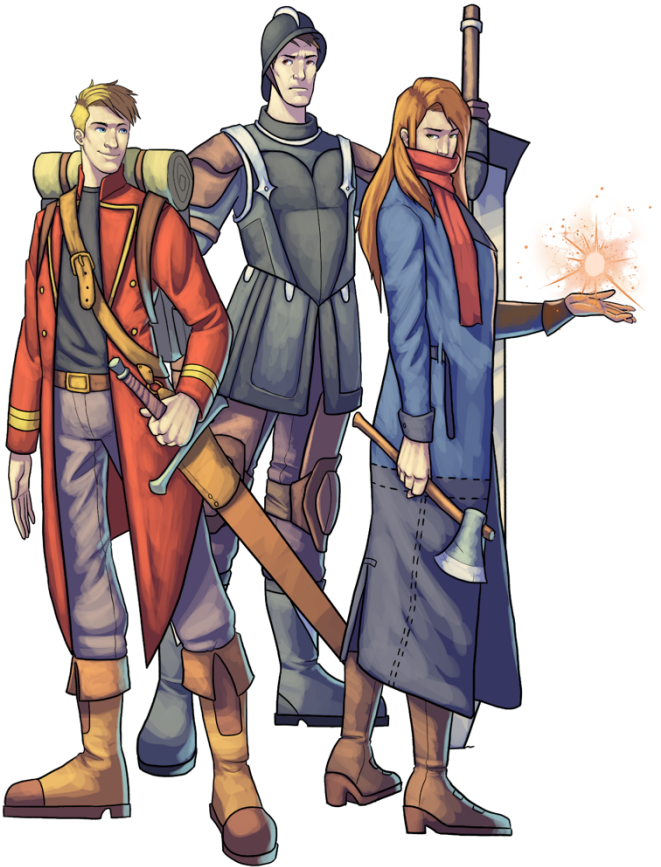
*Tales of Mithrym*

*At the Sign of  
the Running  
Horse*

*Jimmy Clephane*

# At the Sign of the Running Horse

A Tale of Mithrym



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## **At the Sign of the Running Horse**

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# Long March

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Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee was starting to feel light in his head as he passed the last of the town buildings. He looked over his shoulder one last time as he trudged along the horse-beaten path alongside a narrow stream.

With one long glance he took in all the brown and decaying features of the small townscape. For a moment he thought the path and the other buildings were all spinning round and round as they melted into the sinking sun of the evening sky.

He gave a long sigh and continued walking. He could not stop here. He did not want to. Elvin found it peculiar when he realised that he had not really wanted a lot of things these past few months. Like the battle dress uniform he wore. He wanted to take it off, make a fire, and throw it in. He laughed a hollow laugh to think that this outfit - the

long berry-red coat, the black shirt and trousers - that had given him so much purpose and respect from his fellow soldiers, and command over his platoon, felt so worthless as if it had become a knife without a blade ... a burden. But he swallowed the urge to be rid of it, tightened his grip on the straps of his pack, and carried on.

He did not have a particular goal in mind. But he had realised that he was not moving aimlessly. He was walking in the direction of another small town named Crail. His home. Or, at least, it had been his home. But it felt empty now. Elvin's heart did not want to get back there too soon. He was only going that way because his feet needed a direction. So they kept stomping the earth.

Suddenly he noticed that the narrow stream that had been running alongside him, with its cool, clear smell and fresh breeze, had vanished some way back. The path he was on now led into a gloomy forest.

The sun would soon set and darkness would come. Who knew how long this path into the forest was going to stretch for. And even if he could stick to it, would he find a place to rest for the night before the darkness fell completely?

Elvin sighed heavily as he touched the hilt of the sword strapped at his waist and he entered the forest. If the night came, he thought to himself, and he still could not find a place to rest, then he might have to make use of that sword. He was already rethinking his decision to not stop at that last town. What was it called? Shellmere. That was it.

He chided himself. This is what happens when you switch off your mind and drift. But it was okay because Elvin did not really care if he couldn't find a place before nightfall.

If he had to, he could spend the night in that forest. After all, even a jungle in the middle of nowhere was more desirable than the battlefields that



had been his home for the past ... What would it be? ... Four years?... Five years? ... Ever since his mother and father had died - Een rest their souls - and he had enlisted in the king's army to fight the motherless hoard from Gallio.

He had met one or two people on the way from Shellmere, but there was no one at all on this path through the forest. In the shadows, hidden creatures were groaning and unseen insects were buzzing. Elvin pressed on, putting one foot in front of the other, keeping his mind together and ignoring his crying muscles.

He had been walking since the morning and had only stopped once to eat. But he had been on the road for over two weeks all tolled. He had started from Tyneshire, where he had last been healed from his injuries and was then discharged and dismissed.

Before Tyneshire, he was at the front lines, leading his renowned platoon as an honourable lieutenant.

He didn't know why he was walking all this way. After leaving the healing station, he couldn't deny the void in his heart. It was like the disease that had taken mother and father and had eaten them up. The void was eating up Elvin too, from the inside out. Maybe he was walking to punish himself. He'd done that to new recruits before. Why not give himself a taste of it too? Maybe he was just desperate to leave something behind that he just could not shake off.

The forest had grown abysmally dim. The croaking and groaning and clicking and buzzing of living things was growing louder. Soon though, another sound was floating in from somewhere down the road. Elvin followed the sound hopefully and soon found a large Tavern in a clearing to the left of the road. He was quite surprised to find such a big building in such a dense forest but he

felt so relieved at the same time. Surely here he could find some decent lodging for the night, it would at least have to be better than sleeping outside.

Sounds of drinking and eating were coming from a large room that looked as if it filled the ground floor. There was a stables off to one side, but as he did not ride a horse he left the path and headed straight for the main doors.

The sign above the entrance showed a black stallion, rearing in full gallop. The smell of ale, meat and bread came out to meet him.

A sense of calm returned to him as the sound of gossiping voices and laughter filled his ears. But before he pushed the door something made Elvin pause. He felt as if he had hit an invisible wall. His mind flooded with dark memories of the past years. But the feeling lasted for no more than a fragment of a second ...

and right now he was too tired to care.

# Short Rest

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A strong smell of hops and tobacco met Elvin's nose the moment he opened the door and walked inside. People were merrily drinking and smoking around the many small tables and benches laid out around the rather large room. To his left stretched a long bar with eight or so staff tending to their customers. The bar was not too crowded as most of the patrons had not come without companions to sit and talk with. On the farthest side of the room, between the long counter and the tables was a small stage on which musicians were eagerly setting up their instruments for another set.

Elvin breathed out pleasantly as he took it all in then headed towards the centre of the counter where he could see a gap among the regulars. He dropped his pack by a stool and sat down. He closed his eyes for a moment, almost falling asleep as the

sudden comfort and relief of his surroundings rushed over him after such a long day's journey with barely a rest. He rubbed his neck and tried to focus.

A bald, rather hunched bartender made his way to Elvin. His clothes hung off him and his face was pink from work and heat.

“How may I be of service to you, my lord?” the bartender said with a smile.

“I beg your pardon?” Elvin frowned.

“It is Siris Reddark, my lord. But please, call me Siris.” The man continued with the same broad smile. “Pardon me if I was overly observant, but it is quite clear to me from your noble brow and your strong features that you are from the Western Nobility. Yes? And on top of that, you are a lieutenant judging by the silver plate stitched on the breast of your uniform. Yes?” Siris laughed a hollow laugh. “Because I do not think a nobleman would steal such a

uniform, ha-ha! Yes? So, you see, it is rather impressive seeing such a high-ranking noble soldier such as yourself in this dim corner of the land.”

Elvin chuckled politely. He knew his heritage well enough although he did not much care for it. Was he really that easy to spot?

“Your eyes are certainly quite sharp, Mister Reddark.” He smiled. Siris bowed low. “I will have whiskey, if you please.” His stomach turned. “And whatever meat, soup and bread you serve for supper.”

“At once, my lord.”

“Also, could you fix me a room?” His muscles ached. “With a hot shower? If possible. I will pay upfront.”

Siris clapped to another of the bartenders. “It will be arranged at once, my lord.”

Minutes later, Elvin was presented with a bowl of hot food. He had just started eating when he suddenly

noticed that the musicians had started playing again. The laughter from one of the tables cut through the sound and drew his attention. Chewing a piece of meat, he looked over his shoulder to see what was happening. He nearly spat out the whole mouthful as his eyes fell on a hulk of a man dancing the silliest dance he had ever seen.

Elvin gulped his food down and watched the enormous, muscular - and heavily armoured - man dancing and raising cackles of laughter from all around him. He soon realised that that large man was not much of a man at all. He must be younger than Elvin! And by a significant margin at that.

The young man was certainly big for his age though. Elvin could hardly imagine a recruiting officer turning him down. Not with those muscles. He was reminded of one of the soldiers who had served under him - no longer alive, Een rest his soul - and with that, Elvin tensed again. He



sighed and turned his attention back to his food.

In the corner of his eye, Elvin noticed a movement from across the room. Almost imperceptible in this raucous room. He turned to look and saw a woman cautiously entering the bar and quietly closing the door behind her. The woman's head and face were hidden by a red scarf, and she wore a pale blue frock coat. Her general travelling attire looked worn. As she came in, she loosened her scarf and let it fall on her shoulder, revealing a pale face and bright red hair.

Much like the young man, she was barely an adult, although she dressed more like a travelling tradesman. She dug her hair out of her clothes and let it fall over her shoulder and began scanning the room from under her furrowed brows in a way that put Elvin in mind of a fisherman looking for fish in the lake to catch with a spear. The young woman's gaze met his own for

a moment then she quickly looked away.

He returned his focus to the food in front of him. A few moments later, he was surprised to hear a quiet but clear voice to his left. The girl was now sitting a few seats down from him and was ordering her own food and beer. Seeing her more closely she looked very tired and seemed quite withdrawn, even nervous. He wondered if perhaps she was not from around here either.

With a large slamming sound on the floor behind him, the laughter around the big young man behind Elvin reached its peak and died down. Elvin heard heavy, unsteady footsteps make their way towards him. The young man stank of ale as he slumped down onto the seat to Elvin's immediate right. He sounded happy and was breathing heavily as he bashed the huge mug on the counter and yelled for a refill. He had a wide grin on his face that Elvin suspected did not go away even

when this stranger was not as tight as an owl.

The younger man took notice of Elvin and gawked at him through glassy green eyes and soon his grin widened even more.

“Oh, look who we have here!”

# Weapon of Choice

“Oh, look who we have here!” the young man said in a slurred voice, “I wouldn’t expect to find one of your lot here of all places.” He made an attempt at bowing towards Elvin, nearly falling out of his seat. “Hello sir! I am Dukki Reptan! Sellsword! It’s an honour to meet you!”

“Pleased to meet you too, Mister ...”

“Just Dukki is fine!”

“Alright,” Elvin smiled, “Dukki. I am Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee. Late of His Majesty’s Men of Foot. You can call me Elvin.” He smiled.

Dukki nodded back then took a long swig from his mug. “Awesome!” He drained the drink then called for more. Leaning in closely he dropped his voice and said while gesturing somewhere at Elvin’s back, “If you need a head cleaved off, I’m your man!” He steadied himself on his

stool as he nearly fell to the floor. “I will give you a good discount!”

Elvin looked over Dukki’s shoulder and saw a sheathed sword hanging from the wall. It was as long as a man, at least six feet, and as wide as a shovel. But he could believe it. Indeed, anything less would simply be a bottleneck for a man of Dukki’s size.

“I appreciate the offer. But I am fine for the moment, thank you.” He said with a nod.

“Oh I mean no offense, your honour! Of course not! Someone like you can obviously handle yourself just fine. It’s clear looking at that silver plate you got there. I only mean that sometimes it’s better to risk money than life, you know what I mean?”

Elvin ignored this and went back to his dinner. “Are you sure you are okay leaving your sword hanging out in the open like that? It looks valuable. What if somebody tried to pinch it when you were not looking?”

Dukki roared with laughter then stared at Elvin. His eyes looked ferocious in the firelight, “Who’d be foolish enough to steal from the man who wields that?”

Elvin nodded. That seemed quite reasonable. Dukki did not look as if he needed the sword to stop a thief.

“And besides,” Dukki continued, “it’s just a lump of steel. The real weapon is right here!” He beat his chest. “How would you steal that?”

Elvin smiled politely and went back to his supper. Dukki continued to drink. Looking back across, Elvin noticed that the young woman had brought out a slim book and was writing in it.

“I’d let it go if I were you, sir,” Elvin jumped out of his skin as he heard Dukki’s voice right beside his ear, “That’s not the sort that a Ranlee would like.”

“You know about Ranlees, do you?”

“Of course!” said Dukki, “What kind of sellsword would I be if I didn’t know who my clients were?” Dukki paused, “Well, I’d not be a very good one then, would I? As I said before, the more power and wealth you’ve got, the more you want folks like us to take care of your dirty work. And the Ranlees is one of the highest-paying customers.”

“Is that so?”

Dukki nodded.

“Well I may be a Ranlee but I am probably the poorest among them.”

“How’s that?”

“Long story. Maybe another time. What about you?”

“What about me?” Dukki asked blankly.

“What are you? A good soldier?”

Dukki roared with laughter again. “I’m an awful soldier!” he exclaimed, “That’s why I’m not wearing one of those uniforms! But I’m a great

killer! And that's what I like! Working hard and then getting to party while someone else cleans up the mess!" He drank again. "Anyway, as I was saying earlier, you'd be better off finding a woman to talk to in pubs better suited to your status. Blood doesn't mix, does it? That's what you folks are always saying."

Elvin sighed, "Dukki, not every nobleman is stuck up like that and not every noble family has a fortune. My father was a Ranlee, right enough, but mother was a commoner." He sipped his drink and looked at his food. "He got cut right out for it, too."

Dukki went silent. After a while he muttered, "Still, a commoner and a street urchin are like whiskey and water. You can guess which one is which."

"How would you know? You do not even know the lady!"

Dukki gave him a strange look. Then said quietly, "A rat knows another



rat when it sees one. And you're free to make your choices, my lord. No one is getting in your way. Certainty, not me, when I don't need to get tangled up in schemes of some assassins or thieves or worse. I keep an ear on the news that comes from the frontlines and I hear stories. And I recognised you the moment I saw you. The hero of Blood Valley! I respect you because you're not like them. Selfish, money-grubbing, lording cowards sitting on our shoulders like ghosts. You're actually brave. You're a fighter! To orphans and abandoned like us, you're our hero."

Dukki slowly got up from his seat, wobbling as he did and dragging up the heavy mug refilled for the umpteenth time and added "it was nice meeting you, sir." He attempted a salute than walked away back to the table.

Dukki's nose wrinkled, "The air in here is so foul, don't you think? And

I don't mean the tobacco or the stale ale ...”

Elvin sat still for a while with a piece of bread in his hand. Dukki's words had left him thunderstruck. He did not really know what to think. But he could not help feeling some shame for thinking so low of the man. Should he call him back and apologize? Perhaps not. Dukki had started to dance again as the music picked up. And this time a few young men and women joined him too. No, he would leave things well enough alone. This was not the time for confrontation.

He finished his food and got up ready to go and find his bed. For a moment though a thought struck him, what had Dukki meant about the air?

# Badge

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Quite unbeknownst to the people inside, a large carriage had just pulled up outside the tavern. Lanterns hung from brackets at its side illuminated a plaque that declared “ALSAGER CITY WATCH”

A group of armed wardens disembarked, holstered fire wands at their sides, and dispersed around the tavern save for two. One, tall and thin had a dignified air and an expression of distrust about her, while the other – a big, stocky lad – followed behind her with a permanent frown fixed on his face. He was staring at the Tavern’s door as if trying to see if he could shoot lightning at it from his eyes.

Meanwhile, inside, the assembled patrons continued their drinking, smoking, dancing, and eating without a care.

“Come along, Boris,” said the captain as she started towards the door, “and look, I know that you have a bone to pick with necromancers and their ilk, but try and keep that temper of yours in check, do you understand? Don’t expect any mercy from me if you step out of line on this one. You’ll be transferred to some backwater dump immediately!”

“But sir,” said Boris plainly, “we’re already in a backwater dump, aren’t we?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t get smart with me, lad! Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, sir,” said Boris with a nod, “I’ll behave.”

“Good.” They reached the door and the captain gripped the knob, “Then let’s catch that nasty creature. We’ll seal it in a lead cell and throw away the key!”

“Or we’ll put it out of its misery,” whispered Boris coldly from behind her as she pulled on the door.

Inside, Elvin was starting to wonder whether his fatigue was finally starting to drive him mad. He decided to call it a night and head straight for his bed and get a good sleep.

Siris, the bartender, had come over to stand near him, he was standing right next to Elvin and he was staring at the door. For a moment, it seemed to Elvin that the man’s eyes had turned completely black, without a spot of white that could be seen on them. Elvin rubbed his own eyes. He was definitely tired. It was the only explanation.

Still, his curiosity got the better of him as he wondered just what the bartender was so engrossed in looking at. He followed Siris’ stare and looked at the entrance of the bar. The door was closed shut.

Ah, but no ... the door was suddenly and sharply opened, revealing two figures clad in dark coats, breeches and boots. Each wore a tri-corn hat.

They were wardens, officers of the law. Elvin recognized them immediately, as anyone would. The big one, a young man, followed the woman into the room. Elvin was extremely surprised to find yet another big, stocky young man in the same room, and he wondered about the diet in this part of the country that produced such a high number of giants.

The woman was older, and she surveyed the room with a stern gaze. Elvin always had trouble telling the age of older women, but she was quite striking, and her poise exuberated a sense of command. Elvin had met women like her on the battlefields, women who could command anyone and fought shoulder to shoulder in the thick of it.

Elvin snapped his attention back to Siris and breathed with relief to find that his mind must have been playing tricks on him after all. Siris was looking perfectly normal as he was taking orders from people again. Whatever Elvin had seen before, the effect had worn off.

The big guy took a table by the door. Nearly all tables were occupied, so he had to share with an old man who had passed out from gin. The woman, however, took up the seat next to Elvin.

He tried not to mind her much as she settled into her seat and he scraped as his bowl and scooped up some of the now cold soup. But he lowered his spoon as he began to hear what she was saying and he could not help but look at her.

“Oh my!” said the captain, “I can’t believe there would be such a high-ranking military officer in a place like this. What an odd stroke of luck!”

Elvin put down his spoon, dusted off his hands and extended his right arm towards her.

“Good evening, ma’am. I’m Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee. Late of His Majesty’s ...” She waved away the formality. “... pleased to meet you,” he finished.

The captain smiled and nodded courteously as she shook Elvin’s hand.

“The pleasure is all mine I assure you,” she said with a smile. “And It’s an honour. I’m Joyce White. Warden Captain of the Alsager City Guard.”

“Alsager?” Elvin started “Isn’t that a bit far from here? What are Alsager Wardens doing all the way out here?”

She chuckled. “A bit blunt, aren’t we, sir? But I suppose it’s to be expected from such a battle-hardened young fellow as yourself.”

Elvin laughed a dry laugh. “Pardon me, captain. I am afraid that my



years in the war taught me anything but manners. How about you let me buy you that drink as an apology?”

“I’ll accept that!” the captain smiled, and then winked, “On the condition that you’ll let me buy your dinner to express my gratitude as a patriot for your service to this great nation.”

Elvin paused for a moment, then shrugged. “As you wish.”

“Thank you,” she said. “So, how many years ... ?”

“Five. I think ...”

“That’s ... nearly a quarter of your life, surely?”

Elvin turned and gave her a curious look, and said, “That’s one way of putting it I suppose. But ... yes. About that.”

“Where are you from, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m from the West.”

“I can’t say that it shows in your accent, does it? Did you straighten it out in the barracks?”

“I did, actually,” nodded Elvin as he played with his soup again. “The men I was with - for some reason - never seemed to be from the West. They were mostly from the Midlands.”

“Hmm,” the captain’s eyes fell upon the short sword attached to Elvin’s waist. “That’s an unusual-looking blade.”

# Proficiency

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“Hmm,” the captain’s eyes fell upon the short sword attached to Elvin’s waist. “That’s an unusual-looking blade. I think I’ve seen that sort carried by a nobleman before. Is it perhaps a family heirloom?”

Elvin laughed out loud. “My apologies, but the only heirloom I received was a ring that belonged to my grandfather. And I sold it in a town near the frontlines a couple of years ago because I didn’t want people killing me to steal it.”

“Then how did you end up with that?” she continued, “I beg your pardon but it’s the first time I’ve seen such a fine weapon up close!”

“It’s a long story, ma’am, I’m sure it would only serve to bore you.”

“Not at all! Please, let’s hear it!” She was looking at Elvin with wide curious eyes, “I won’t be able to stop

thinking about it if I don't hear it now!"

Elvin sighed. "Alright. I give up." He unstrapped his sword and put it on the counter between the two of them. She poured over it but held back from touching it.

"This is," he said, channelling the dry words of the old officer that had presented him with it, "the holy sword of the Light Crusader. Though some call it Octomon because legend has it that it can, with attunement, grow eight monstrous blades." He sighed. "Anyway, it once belonged to General Sedric Smythe, gifted to him by Queen Mary herself. During the battle of Blood Valley, I somehow managed to slay the dark general Lucas. The dog was so evil, people called him "the living violence", imagine that! So, after that, our dear general Smythe called me to his chamber where he gathered all the high-ranking officers, promoted me in the field, and gifted me this." The captain hung on his words. "He told

me I was ten times more worthy of it than he was.”

The captain’s eyes sparkled, she seemed mesmerized hearing such a tale. “That must have been such a meaningful achievement, eh? How did it make you feel?”

“Nothing,” said Elvin and resumed eating.

She seemed baffled, but the utterly blank look in his eyes and the hollow sound in his voice somehow discouraged her from asking more. She watched him for a moment. After a while, she cleared her throat and said pointing to the sword, “How do you carry it just like that? I mean, this thing must be worth a hundred times more than whatever ring you had on you, right? Aren’t you afraid of getting ambushed for it too?”

He looked at her.

“I mean no offense, of course!” she added quickly, “It’s just ...”

Elvin smiled. "It's okay. I'm not invincible. I wish, but not even close." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "This doesn't get stolen probably because it has a mind of its own."

"Really? Fascinating ..."

Elvin sighed. "At any rate, it seems that this sword can somehow recognise its master. There was a ritual when I was given it. They erased the general's name and etched mine onto the blade. It was a very complex process and I cannot explain it to you properly. The point is, this sword will only listen to me and me alone. It understands my thoughts and what I want to do with it. If, let us say, it were stolen, then the sword would simply not be very useful or valuable because it would be just a lump of cheap steel ... useless in any other hand than mine. And if I were killed, then this sword will lose all its blessings and become a very worthless piece of junk. I think

that's why I'm not afraid of it being stolen."

The captain's eyes glittered again. "Will you show me the blade, please?"

Elvin picked up the sword. "There's also one other reason this thing cannot be stolen."

"What is it?" said Joyce eagerly.

"Because it always comes back to me!"

As he said that, Elvin unsheathed the sword. As the blade undressed, it glinted and shone with the brilliance of an aurora. Elvin held it up in the air and its body shimmered as if the light was captured inside the metal and was fighting to get out. Gasps could be heard around the room. Elvin noticed Dukki amongst those watching him closely.

Then, all of a sudden, he twisted his body and in one fluid motion, he hurled the sword into the crowd which flinched and gasped aloud.

The sword slipped through the gap and plunged into the wood on the opposite wall and stuck there.

Elvin simply kept his hand raised. The sword, buried to its hilt, deep in the wooden beam, trembled as if some invisible hand was shaking it. It then shook free and hurtled back through the crowd again, this time to a small applaud. It sped back and came to rest in Elvin's hand, he casually sheathed it back into its scabbard with a small smile and attached it to the baldrick at his waist and returned to his soup.

The crowd began cheering and clapping but Elvin paid it no heed. He was feeling perfectly silly for showing off. It was the weapon he had killed with and he had flung it around as a party trick. Still, he was also quite surprised to discover that that "party trick" had no effect whatsoever on the captain. In fact, she was looking rather serious and lost in deep thought.



“I forgot that I was dealing with a warden. I beg your pardon for scaring these innocent people,” Elvin said apologetically. “Though they don’t seem to mind it too much ...”

She broke in, “Sorry, what did you say? I ... wasn’t paying attention ...”

Elvin smiled, “Captain, come now, I’ve given you quite the story. I even gave you a bit of a show ... But you still have not said what business brings you here in the middle of the night to the middle of nowhere ... where, in point of fact, you do not actually have any jurisdiction.” He smiled. “Of course, it’s none of my business but ...”

# Passive Perception

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The captain pulled a cigar and a tinder box from her pocket and lit up, taking a long breath and then leaning in towards Elvin. She spoke in a low whisper.

“So here’s the thing. We’re following a lead and honestly we could do with whatever help we can get. A man of your standing would be useful.”

Elvin’s muscles ached and his head was still swimming from a long day of walking but he nodded dutifully and she continued.

“We’re on the scent of a necromancer. We had an anonymous letter that gave directions to this very site. There’s nothing else for quite a distance around and despite the writer’s secrecy, the details do all seem to match up quite genuinely. And here

we are. This is a big deal, they've called in wardens from three counties to track down the last of the necromancers so we've got the authority and jurisdiction to take them away or to kill on site as needed."

Elvin straightened up, it looked like this could be a long night. "Have you got any sort of description to go by?"

The warden sighed and drew on her cigar.

"Unfortunately, no. But we've got this place surrounded and no one leaves until they've been caught."

Elvin frowned but kept his voice low. "Are you saying we're in lockdown? This building is full of people. Innocent people. What if ..."

The captain straightened up and stared sternly at Elvin. "I know the risks well enough. We can't let this monster give us the slip."

Elvin scoffed. The captain frowned.

“This is exactly why we could use your help. You’re an experienced military man. You know how to hunt for people, I’m sure.” She drew on the cigar again. “And I’m also sure you know your duty.”

Elvin sighed. The captain smiled.

“And you’re also just another patron. No one’s going to be watching you. They’ll all be too interested in us.”

“I am sorry but I simply cannot.” Said Elvin “I’ve been on the road all day and right now I’m exhausted. I am quite sure I would only get in your way.”

The captain seemed to mull this over for a moment. “I understand,” she said, “but please do think about it, won’t you? If you change your mind and want to help, just say.”

Elvin nodded.

“It was an honour meeting you, lieutenant. Thank you for your service,” She put her hand on his shoulder then turned around and

made to walk away. She froze as her eyes fell on the young woman in the blue frock coat sitting beside her. She forced a smile and then sat down again. Elvin's head was swimming as he tried to focus. The two seemed to be talking for a short while then the captain went off to join the tall warden she had come in with.

The young woman looked apprehensive, even a bit startled as the captain left.

“Hello,” Elvin said, “Is everything all right?”

She looked at him curiously and nodded, “I'm fine.” Then she turned away and sipped her drink.

“Alright then. Enjoy your drink.” Elvin had finished his meal and he was now just finishing his drink too.

The young woman turned back and looked him up and down for a moment.

“Hi!” She said. “I'm sorry that was rude of me. I'm Derville,” She held a

hand out to Elvin. He took it and smiled. "I'm Elvin, nice to meet you."

"You're not from around here, are you?" She asked.

"No, I'm from Crail. It's quite a way to the West."

She nodded and continued to drink. Elvin noticed that she seemed to be on edge as she talked. As he was about to speak again he heard an argument erupt from behind him. He tilted his head and looked round. Dukki was arguing with the captain's companion. Apparently Dukki was not too happy about the big man sitting so solemnly while others were laughing and having fun. When he'd invited the man to join the dancing crowd and was refused, Dukki had gotten angry and was now shouting at him. The warden looked visibly annoyed. Elvin chuckled to himself.

"I suspect you are not from around here either?" Elvin said, turning back to Derville.

“No,” she said quickly, “just passing through.”

“Oh! Where are you heading?”

She seemed to think for a moment.

“I’m heading to Cherryville. Do you know it?”

Elvin smiled.

“I’m afraid not. But it sounds like a beautiful town.”

“Oh, it is,” she nodded, “Particularly good food. It’s to die for.”

“Oh really? Maybe I’ll go visit there someday. I have a lot of free time on my hands now it would seem.”

“You should,” smiled Derville, “It’s popular with travellers and sight seers. It’s one of the great sites. A huge place. Sort of place you can get easily lost in. A lot of big houses owned by a lot of big families. The Osneys, the Vissiers, the Lombees, the Ranlees ...”

Elvin winced.

“Do you know the Ranlees? They’re quite a big family.”

“You could say that.”

“Did you work for them?”

“Not exactly. It has been a good long time since I last saw any of them now.”

The warden and Dukki were now both shouting. Their voices reached a new high and wrenched Elvin’s attention away from Derville. It did not seem quite so funny now though. The two men were fuming at each other. There was something in that scene that poked somewhere deep in Elvin’s memory, and it was as if some stone wall had crumbled and rushing images flashed past his eyes.

His expression grew darker and darker as he slowly turned his face from the quarrelling men to the bartender who was merrily working away behind the counter between Elvin and Derville. Elvin stared at him long and hard. Inside his mind,



a storm raged as thought fought against fatigue. Reason won out and Elvin spoke, holding firm eye contact with the old man.

“Siris,” he said levelly, “would you care to know how I got this sword?”

# Concentration

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Siris' eyes widened as he smiled "Curious sword you have there, sir. Curious indeed. I saw how it shimmered and flew right back to you after you threw before! I'm sure it comes with quite the tale too!" He said amiably.

Elvin smiled. Derville found it quite disquieting as his eyes suddenly seemed so cold and almost animal. Elvin grinned broadly. Derville had seen that sort of grin growing up and realised something was not right, or soon something was going to go very wrong. The old man seemed to notice this too and he stiffened as his focus fell fully on this stranger in his red coat and sword belt.

Elvin continued, "One of the worst enemies that this great nation ever faced was a man named Lucas. He stands distinguished among the top five generals of Gallio. About two and a half years ago, when the battle

between General Smythe and Lord Lucas reached its climax, we saw the vilest acts of evil occur by that villain's orders."

Siris looked confused. Elvin continued, "Lucas was a dark magician. He called upon the corruptor, Immu, for help. And by the hand of the Fallen Crafter, he summoned twisted spirits from the frozen wastes to possess his men who wielded awful magic and used it against us," Elvin looked down for a moment, silent, then looked back at Siris. "If I begin to describe to you what sort of horrible spells his possessed men used, you would wretch." Elvin sighed, "Our men were dying like lambs at the slaughter."

"I heard about that! News came all the way here." Derville said gravely. "So many good men and women died in horrible ways. You probably can't go anywhere in Angmark without coming across someone who lost a family member in that fight. It was

the greatest tragedy in the last ten years of war.”

Siris nodded solemnly, still quite cautious to see where Elvin was going with this.

“But then,” Elvin smiled a genuine smile, “our general made a gamble to finally stop that villain. It was the most amazing strategy ever devised, born of desperation, wrath, fear, and terrible grief. Yes! General Smythe had lost all three of his daughters – all gallant officers – to the possessed soldiers on the same day. But a lot of that gamble relied upon the performance and luck of me and my men, because our platoon was to be used in order to achieve it all. We were known for pulling through hard missions, and we were asked to perform nothing short of a miracle that day, even if we had to steal it from Ibis herself!

Elvin took a sip of his drink. “The battle next day unfolded all according to the general’s plan and it

led us all the way to the Talik valley, the valley now known as Blood valley. Our soldiers fought all day giving as little as we could and taking ground whenever possible, and we finally managed to draw out Lord Lucas! In the final moments, I took my platoon and arced our way through that sea of possessed monstrosities and I ran my sword straight through Lucas' chest. Then I swung my sword for good measure and took his wicked head from its body.”

Siris, still a little confused, was looking uneasy.

“When he fell, it broke the spell, and the spirits left the Gallion soldiers, leaving behind a host of Lucas' men and women who were charred from inside out. Then when I looked back, I saw a trail of corpses behind me, stretching out towards the far distance like a path through a forest,” Elvin's voice broke, “Not a single one of my people survived. We won that war, but we had lost the

battle. It cost too much. It cost everything.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Siris spoke.

“Is that how you got your sword?” he asked. “By killing the dark general?”

“Indeed,” Elvin said, downing the last of his drink and slamming the glass down on the counter. “You see, that general was a dark wizard. A ‘Magicien des Ténèbres’ as they call them in Gallio. A follower of Immu the Corruptor. We do not call them that over here though, of course. Here where we call them necromancers.”

Siris stiffened.

“When I was in general Smythe’s tent, receiving this holy sword from him, I vowed to myself that if any worshippers of Immu ever crosses my path, I would give them the swiftest of deaths. Battlefield law stipulates that witches like that be hanged ...”

Elvin unsheathed his sword. It glimmered in his hand, throwing up a light onto Elvin's glaring eyes.

"... but if that's not possible, I swore that I would use this sword of mine," Elvin gazed directly into Siris' eyes, "What do you think, Siris? Which one would you prefer?"

Derville looked back and forth from Elvin to Siris. She wondered for a moment what was happening. Why these two seemed ready to fight. Then it all seemed to fall together.

Just then though, a roaring sound snapped their attention from behind where Dukki and the big warden's quarrel had progressed towards throwing fists. Derville gasped as the two huge men threw themselves at each other with a flurry of punches. The captain was bawling, red in the face as she attempted to break them apart but the brawlers didn't seem to pay any heed.

Elvin's and Siris' eyes were locked in. Neither of them moved an inch or

even blinked. Derville's senses heightened as the two seemed to drop all pretence. She slowly moved backwards, picking up her things.

Siris clenched his teeth. His only option seemed to be to fight or to run, either of which would definitely clear away any doubt. He had to do something though, and soon.

Elvin's hand was gripping the hilt of the glowing sword and Siris knew well enough that if he were to move even a hair he would be ready for it.

Siris was thinking hard.

Elvin tensed.

Derville reached into her coat.



# Intimidation

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Siris had begun sweating as he shuffled through his mind for any idea of a way out. He knew that he must not show even the slightest hint of casting a spell. Elvin's left hand held his scabbard as his right hand gripped the sword hilt. Siris knew that in the blink of an eye Elvin could draw that sword and make a deadly strike.

Anger flashed in Elvin's eyes as he held Siris hard in his glare. Whatever Siris did, it would have to be well cloaked. He thought hard, adrenaline running through him and heightening his senses. There must be a spell he could use that would not require him to perform any physical movement, not even speaking it out loud or whispering would work. What could he do?

Elvin continued to eye the bartender sharply, watching him, prepared for anything. He smiled to see Siris' face

caught in its still panic. But then, all of a sudden, in a single moment, it all shifted and suddenly his stomach turned as he saw the man smile back at him. All distress in Siris' face had vanished! Elvin tightened his grip on the sword hilt. He wondered for a moment what to do. Siris was showing no sign of retaliation whatsoever. Instead, he stood quite still, like a stone statue.

Then, suddenly again, light erupted from every part of Siris' body. It was as if the sun itself had come down into that tavern room! Elvin stood there, blinded, staring at the bright light as it filled his every perception, dumbfounded as to what was going on, looking wide-eyed at Siris.

Loud shouts and sharp gasps erupted from the crowd behind. The noises echoed round the room as people scattered, throwing themselves behind doors and under tables. The light died down after a few moments. The whole room were left blinded, befuddled and in a

shaken state of panic, fearing that they were under attack. The music had stopped and for a moment there was absolute silence.

Elvin blinked several times, loosed his grip on his sword and rubbed his eyes. It did not take long for his vision to return but when it did, it was too late. In an instant everyone there saw and understood as they all looked at the source of the bright light. As their vision returned they could see that Siris was now holding Derville like a shield with the sharp edge of his chopping knife pressed hard against her throat.

Gasps and murmuring swept through the room then everything fell quiet again as the patrons quickly sensed the dreadful aura emanating menace. Only the warden captain understood the peril right away, as even her young companion, Boris, took his time to take in all that had just happened.

Elvin gritted his teeth and scowled at the necromancer. Siris now wore an evil grin on his face, shedding the last of his pretence at innocence.

“You vile scum.” Elvin growled in a low voice. “I ... will ... kill ... you ...”

His hand moved back towards his sword’s hilt.

“Hold it, Lord Ranlee!” Siris shouted, pressing the blade harder against Derville’s neck. “Or she will die like a slaughtered hen! I’m not bluffing! Let go of that weapon!”

Elvin bit his lip, fighting a desire to leap at Siris. Slowly he removed his hand from the sword.

“Push it over the counter!”

Elvin untied his sword belt, lifted the weapon slowly in its scabbard and placed it on the bar. He pushed it towards Siris and it fell to the floor at his feet.

“Sir, we’ve found him! That’s the necromancer!” exclaimed Boris to

his captain. She turned to him, exasperated.

“Shut up you fool!” She hissed. “If it weren’t for you, he wouldn’t have gotten a hostage! If I hadn’t been breaking you up from a common bar brawl!”

“But I didn’t start it ...” he protested.

“Shut up! All of you!” Screamed Siris. “I want to get out of here. And if any of you so much as look at me the wrong way, I will slit her throat! You don’t want this poor innocent girl’s blood on your hands, do you?”

A hush fell on the crowd as they all took in the anger in Siris’ eyes, the knife in his hand, Derville held there motionless and terrified.

The captain spoke. “Alright, you win,” she said calmly, “Just don’t hurt the girl. Do you understand?”

“You have yourself a deal, ma’am.” Siris smirked and began walking backwards to the door, holding

Derville tightly in his arms, his eyes still locked on Elvin.

The captain called out commands to the wardens at the door.

Siris waved the knife menacingly as he neared the door then reached behind to open it and slinked out, pulling Derville as he went. The door closed with a slam.

Elvin untensed as a crushing feeling overcame him briefly. His head drooped down, touching the counter, as he gripped the wood hard with both hands.

“Lieutenant?” called the captain from behind, “Are you alright?”

Elvin sighed and lifted his head. He turned and looked at her. “Yes,” he said, “I am fine.”

“Elvin,” the captain touched his shoulder, “I need you to tell me how you figured him out.”

Elvin grimaced. “I saw his eyes turn dark just before you all arrived. I

thought I was seeing things. I thought I was just tired!”

“Oh?”

“Yes. But I was a fool. It was careless.” He sighed again. “Anyway,” he straightened up and saluted, “what is the plan now?”

The captain stood back as she said with a look of determination, “We’re going to pursue him. We won’t rest until that necromancer is captured or dead.”

“Good!” Elvin extended his hand and his sword leapt from the floor. He caught it. “I am taking you up on your offer, captain. It would be foolishness to trust a worshipper of Immu. The young woman, Derville, is not safe. We have to hurry!”

The captain nodded. She signalled to Boris and barked out orders to relay the news and her commands to the rest of the wardens waiting outside and to spread out through the forest with them.

“You and me, together. Let’s go!” She said, turning back to Elvin. He saluted again and the two made to leave.

Just then a hand fell on Elvin’s shoulder. He turned. It was Dukki.

“Wait!”



# Magic Hand

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“Please wait.” Dukki’s hand felt heavy on Elvin’s shoulder.

“What is it, Dukki?” Elvin said, turning to face him.

“Elvin,” the big man looked oddly bothered, “why are you heading off to with the wardens?”

“Well, they asked for my help. I agreed. And now, we are going after Siris and the young woman he took hostage. We’re going to rescue her.”

“But why?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’”

“I mean why would you,” he pointed hard at Elvin, “why go after a necromancer for no reason at all? Why aren’t you just letting the wardens do their job?”

Elvin frowned. “I am letting them do their job. And I am making sure they

do the best they can! They need my help to ...”

“Why would you risk your life for somebody you don’t know? You’re not even getting paid for crying out loud!”

Elvin sighed a deep sigh. He reached a hand up on to Dukki’s shoulder. “Dukki, I am so tired right now that I honestly think I could fall asleep in a pit of snakes and it would not bother me in the slightest! But I am going out there because it is the right thing to do. Sometimes, your action and your inaction can be the difference between life and death for someone else. And sometimes,” he paused, memories of the field at Talik Valley ran past his mind’s eye, “sometimes you have to take action, even when it is not expected of you.” He smiled up at the big man. “Even when you are not getting paid too.”

Dukki stood back and stared at Elvin as he smiled, turned and walked out the door with the captain.

Some way away, Siris was hurrying. He had cuffed Derville's hands and was dragging her along. The chains clanged as the two made their way through the forest without any light in that pitch black darkness.

Derville was stumbling. She had already tripped and fallen four times, to which the vile man had apparently paid no heed. He would simply pull at the chain and drag her to her feet. Her body hurt all over and she scowled with anger at being dragged away like this. Her throat itched from the wound Siris' knife had made but it was only skin deep, and it had already started to heal.

Like Siris, Derville too had found herself in the most unpleasant situation quite unexpectedly, and she was seething about that.

Even through her anger, her pain and her blind stumbling through the darkness of the forest she could not help but wonder in astonishment at the way in which Siris seemed to be

navigating through the darkness without any sort of light or torch. And he did not seem to trip or to fall over or even stagger once! What in the world was going on? Could he really see in this blackness? And why did he keep murmuring to himself?

She focussed herself as they went. Her eyes began adjusting to the darkness but only enough to make out vague shadows far away. She tried another method and closed her eyes. She began listening to the sounds all around her. The animals and insects, the cracking of twigs and brush under their feet. And ... chanting? Yes, Siris was not mumbling or murmuring, he was chanting! She could not make out the words but there was a definite rhythm to it.

Suddenly, Siris stopped. Derville could not see this though and walked straight into him. She called out with the shock of it, lost her balance again and fell down to the ground. She quickly got to her feet, furiously

squaring on her captor. She paused though as she heard his chanting quickly get much louder. There was nothing about it that she could make out. The words were strange. Gritty and harsh. She simply stood, baffled, almost forgetting her anger completely. Captivated.

She felt the chain extending from her cuffs fall to the ground. Siris had let go of it. Then, a pair of faint, red, glowing points of light appeared. They dimly lit the area with an eerie light. As her eyes adjusted, she could see that they were the eyes of a small straw doll in Siris' right hand. In that red light, she saw too Siris' own shrivelled-looking face looking back at her. His eyes were pitch-black with no hint of white in them.

Derville felt paralyzed with terror. She could not even scream or call out.

“Be still,” Siris uttered in a grating voice, “while I plant this doll in that tree over there.”

He walked off into the night with the glowing doll in his hand.

As he turned, something in Derville's mind clicked. Years of ducking and dodging had heightened her own senses but it did not take a seasoned thief to see an opportunity like this when it presented itself so readily.

She had some skills though that she had built up over the years. She shook her shackled hands and over the right one a misty glove seemed to form. She concentrated hard and it moved away from her and hung there in the air just in front of her. In this darkness it was easy to open her eyes to the faint stream of magic running through all things. She smiled. As she commanded it, the spectral hand picked up the chain and, with the tension eased, she began to work the lock.

It was no real work at all to free her hands completely. She willed the spectral hand to lower the chain quietly to the ground then, with a

twist of her wrist, it returned to her own hand and then vanished.

Crouching down, she reached inside her coat and brought out a short hatchet that she had taken to hiding there for those times when sneaking out was just not a practical option. She inched her way along, carefully dodging the brush and thickets.

Following the red light, she could make out Siris' shadowy form just in front of it. Pulling herself round to the side she pressed her back against a tree, raised the axe and readied her attack.

# Blessing

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Dukki ordered a drink and re-joined his friends after Elvin went away. The crowd was somewhat unsettled by recent events, not least to discover there had been a necromancer in their favourite pub! Everybody was interestedly talking about it. It had been over two months since Siris had joined the staff and all the regulars had immediately taken a liking to him for his friendly attitude and refreshing manner. Now they were all exclaiming their shock to think they had been drinking beers poured by a worshipper of Immu!

Dukki disliked this new line of conversation. It was far too serious for his liking. He preferred to be dancing with them and drinking with them and laughing with them, and certainly not listening to them all talk about how they could have all been poisoned and sacrificed so that



Siris could please his dark lord any time he wanted.

On top of that, Elvin's words kept ringing in his ears. They weighed on him. He was confused by this feeling of guilt as he sat among friends in comfort, drinking cold drinks, eating hot food all while that girl was out there, hostage to a madman. He could be helping out the wardens too. Of course, they probably would not pay him for it ... but he knew deep down that he could help.

He knew how to hunt and to track and he could help them track down Siris. He could help rescue ... she was probably already dead though, he thought. He sipped at his drink. If she was not dead then she was almost certainly being tortured by that mad monster out in the dark of the night ... which was probably even worse ...

“Oh for Een's sake!” yelled Dukki as he hammered the wooden table with both of his fists. The legs shattered

under his assault and the broken table fell along with all the mugs and plates of food that it had held. His friends all gasped in shock and stared at him.

“What in the name of Een are you doing, you idiot!” howled one of the bartenders, quickly running towards Dukki from the other side of the room carrying a broom over her head.

Dukki stood up and turned to look at her. “Sorry!” he shouted and, smiling, he flung a bag of silver coins towards her. She stopped part way, letting go of the broom and catching the pouch out of the air.

“That’s for everything!” He looked down at the mess. “Including the furniture! You can keep the change!” Dukki rushed over to get his sword then ran out the door leaving everyone gaping and wondering what had possessed him all of a sudden.

He ran down the path. Elvin's words. That was what had possessed him. Like a ghost.

Meanwhile, in the dark of the forest, Derville stood watching Siris. Clutching the handle of her small axe. She could not help but wonder what the man was up to. His chanting had become irregular and he seemed to be absorbed in whatever he was doing with the doll. In the dim light she could see that he was planting the doll into the hollow of a tree. Though she was not sure why, she knew it couldn't be anything good.

She closed her eyes and held the hatchet high in the air. She began reciting a prayer in the dark behind the tree. Invisible in the darkness, a thin black smoke began erupting from the hatchet's blade and it swirled around the small weapon and on to Derville.

Her preparation finished just as Siris finished too. She smiled though, he was well within her range.

He turned back round and made to walk back to where he had left her. He paused abruptly sensing the danger and seeing her coming out from behind a tree near him. She looked calm as she held the axe firmly. He wondered for a moment where she had gotten it then chided himself for not having searched her first.

“So, you slipped your bonds, did you?” he said in the same awful grating voice. Then laughed, “Serves me right for underestimating you!” He smiled darkly.

Derville gritted her teeth, she kept her distance as she brought the hatchet forward and pointed it at him.

“I’m going to shut that foul mouth of yours for good!” She hissed.

Siris chuckled. “Aww! So hostile! Such a great tragedy. Yes? Why does everyone hate us so much? We’re just innocent, pious men for Immu’s sake!”

“Innocent?” Derville scoffed.

Siris roared with laughter.

“Well how about this? You come to your senses and behave like a good little hostage ...” He brought out a pouch and shook it. It made a gentle, clanging noise. “... and you can have this. Twenty gold coins! I’d say that’s more than fair for your ... services.”

Fury burned in Derville’s eyes. As it did, the ground beneath them began to glow as a great circle appeared, surrounding the two of them. Strange shapes, lines and runes lit the trees and brush around with a bright white light.

Siris looked alarmed as he frantically gazed around him.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he cried. “What are you doing, you little brat!”

Derville smiled. “How does it feel? See this hatchet right here? It’s been blessed by the priests of Castilla! Crafter of Chaos!”

“That’s a magic weapon?” Siris screamed with rage.

“That’s right! And once you’re caught, you can’t escape! It will run you down until it kills you!”

Derville let go of the hatchet and rather than falling to the ground, it hung in the air in front of her. Suddenly, the blade shot toward the necromancer like an arrow from a bow. It was so fast that Siris did not even have time to flinch. The hatchet slammed into his chest and drove into his ribs.

He was thrown down to the ground by the force of the impact and lay perfectly still, unmoving, with her hatchet buried in his chest.

# Area of Effect

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Derville breathed a sigh of relief. This ought to square things with the warden. She wondered for a moment whether there might even be a bounty she could collect for the necromancer.

In a moment though, all happiness faded fast.

“Did you really think it would be that easy?” The terrible, grating voice swirled around Derville as it flowed through the trees.

She flinched as she looked around in panic. She could see Siris’ body on the ground. It seemed to be changing shape. It was twisting and writhing on the ground and turning into a ... deer?

From behind a tree, the real Siris stepped out.

“You foolish little girl!” he shouted mockingly. “You think you’re oh so

clever, yes?” He roared with laughter, “You’ve barely even scratched the surface of the possibilities of magic! Allow me to show you how it’s done!”

Utterly terrified, Derville stepped back. “How did you do it? That’s not possible!”

Siris said darkly, “You dare attempt to take my life when you hadn’t even noticed the marking rune I had placed on you? Did you think I would go away leaving my hostage behind so easily? Do you think I’m naïve? That rune told me what you were doing every second!” He scoffed. “That’s why I prepared this little ... substitute.”

All of a sudden, glowing blue chains shot out of Siris’ hands. They wrapped around Derville like snakes and held her hands tightly together.

“There, that should stop you trying any more of your childish magic!” He said and began walking away. “Come



along now. And do be quiet unless you want to be gagged as well!”

Compelled by the magic chains, Derville followed him through the trees. She hated him even more than before.

As they moved off, sounds erupted out of the forest behind them, a voice was yelling out through the darkness. It was Elvin! He was leading the way, shining a lantern in one hand as his sword glowed in the other. Beside him, the captain of the wardens was holding a loaded fire wand. Sparks of orange light flickered in the barrel.

Elvin took peered around the dark forest.

“Are you sure it was a good idea to come in pairs after a necromancer?” he said as he made his way, narrowly avoiding the low branches.

“Why? Because it would be unfair for the necromancer?” the captain chuckled.

“Yes, that was definitely what I meant!” He replied sarcastically. “It would hardly be good sport to gang up on a murderer like that!” he added, a little more hotly than he expected.

She laughed. “We’re going to get to them and end this. I promise! My wardens have strict orders to surround but not to engage.”

“Good,” said Elvin, “but it will be different if I get to him first. I just want to let you know. I will engage Siris while you get Derville away and call for backup. Is that clear, Captain?”

The captain sighed. “Sure,” she said, “I agree.”

“And can we dispense with the jokes while we are on the hunt,” he said heavily, “each word should be spent cautiously. I don’t want us to be ambushed or miss our chance because we were joking and having a laugh.”

By Een's hammer, what a grumpy young man, thought the captain as she watched Elvin's back darkly silhouetted by the lantern light.

The two continued quietly for some way.

"For the love of the crafters," the captain exclaimed in a disappointed tone, "we must have been walking for nearly an hour! I'm surprised we haven't found a single clue left behind by them!"

"I was never really much of a tracker, to be honest with you," Elvin replied, "and our quarry specifically chose the woods to face us. He could have taken the carriage or a horse and gone down the road ... but he did not. He must be very confident in whatever he is doing."

"For Een's sake!" she cursed.

"Indeed," Elvin nodded, "we will be in a world of trouble if we are not careful. I am quite certain he plans to kill us."

The captain considered this. If only she had some way to tell the other wardens that too.

“Stop!” Elvin halted with his hand raised and fists clenched. “Do not move!”

The captain flinched but she was well trained enough to not pull the trigger on her loaded wand. Now was no time to waste a cartridge, and certainly not to give away their location like that.

“What’s going on?” She whispered. “What did you see?”

“We are walking into a trap.” He replied gravely then turned back towards her. “I have a sense for these things.”

“I see.” She said. “Then thank Een that you were with me. But what sort of trap?”

“I am not sure.”

The captain thought for a moment. “I don’t think Siris could have had

enough time to make a powerful trap. He would have had to keep moving.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small charm. Placing a finger on one side of it, the metal began to glow with a blue light. She held it out and moved it around them. The pale light washed over nearby objects without really illuminating them. She stopped though, just as a single object began to shine out in response.

“There,” she said, pointing to a tree nearby, “there’s something in the hollow of that trunk.”

Signalling for Elvin to move behind her, she draw up her wand and, aiming it at the tree, pulled the trigger.

Bright orange fire engulfed the tree for a moment but it died down quickly.

The two searched the trunk and found a small, carved doll, charred and smouldering.

The captain took out her charm again and moved it over the doll curiously.

“That could have been nasty,” she said as she finished the checks, “If we had walked into the radius of that curse, our minds would have been taken and sealed inside the doll.”

Elvin shuddered.

She continued. “We would have been left empty. Walking and talking, but without thoughts or memories or anything! We would have been like living puppets.”

Elvin looked around at the hundreds of dark trees.

The captain began reloading her wand.

The two continued on cautiously.

# Legendary

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Elvin and the Warden Captain continued some way further through the forest.

All of a sudden though, Elvin stood still, holding a hand up towards the captain and signalling for her to stop as well.

“What is it?” she asked, concerned, “more intuition? Is there another trap ahead?”

“No.” Elvin stood still, listening hard. “I heard something. It did not sound like a trap. It sounded more like ...”

His voice faded to silence as he paced along, trying hard not to disturb anything around them. Gradually, the captain heard a sound too. A murmuring or possibly a groaning. It did not sound evil or malevolent in any way. In fact, it sounded as though ...

“Someone’s hurt!” She called out in a whisper.

Elvin held the torch out ahead of them and in its dim light they made out the figure of a man, slumped at the foot of a thick tree. His face was frozen in a mixture of terror and pain. Deep gashes down his arms and legs and across his neck were bright red with fresh blood. From each of his wounds there poured a dark black smoke that seemed to hiss with poison.

The captain gasped and cocked her fire wand as she looked around for any sign of a hostile presence.

Elvin’s face darkened as he came to recognise the man. It was Dukki. So, he had come to help them. The young man had decided to do the right thing after all! Elvin sighed heavily. Just look how he had been paid for his efforts.

“There is no one else around us, captain,” he said gravely, “you can relax.”



She lowered her wand and looked again at Dukki. Placing a hand on Elvin's shoulder, she knelt down beside the two of them.

"Wasn't he a sellsword? What was he even doing here? I don't understand!"

Elvin hung his head.

"It's my fault." He said coldly. "I told him to be heroic. He came running to the rescue." Elvin lifted his head again. "He paid the price for my stupidity," Elvin's voice caught in his throat as he looked at Dukki's suffering. The young man was fast unconscious and what little light remained seemed to be fading from his eyes. "The necromancer got him."

For a moment they sat there silently. Elvin held the young man's hand and began to pray a soldier's prayer. He turned though as he heard the captain gasp beside him. She was reaching into her knapsack. She took out a small vial of dark red liquid.

Elvin stared at it for a moment.

“Is that ... ?” He began.

“Yes,” she said, uncorking it and smelling the thick liquid inside, “a legendary one. It cost me three month’s wages! I always expected I would need it for a particularly dark encounter.

Elvin gestured around them.

The captain nodded.

“Indeed! I’d say this qualifies. If any of us last the night it will be a miracle.”

She leant in and poured the liquid on to Dukki’s tongue. He swallowed it unconsciously then let out a long, cold breath. For a moment, everything around seemed to become absolutely silent.

Then, in an instant, the dark smoke appeared to evaporate from Dukki’s body as his wounds suddenly began to knit themselves back together! His pale face filled with colour again

and his eyes lit with life as he began to smile his broad smile.

Elvin gazed at the captain gratefully.

“You’re a good person, captain. And I tell you, I have met precious few in my life!”

The captain smiled. “I’m just doing my job. This young man risked his life for someone he didn’t know and something he had nothing to do with. It would’ve been a crime not to honour that. Now, give him a minute or two. He should be up and about in ...”

Her words trailed off as, all of a sudden, Dukki sat bolt upright! He breathed heavily, fuming like a bull as he cried out.

“Oh, by Castilla! Necromancers are strong! We’re all doomed!”

Elvin grabbed Dukki’s shoulders. “Calm down, Dukki! You are safe now! You are all right! What happened? Tell me what happened!”

Dukki looked at Elvin as if he were seeing him for the first time.

“Oh, Elvin!” he gaped, “I ... I went out to look for them. I went to rescue her! I found her in the forest. There were glowing chains binding her. I saw him too! That dog! I charged at him. He used some sort of whip on me. He called it out of the air! It shone so bright! It burnt! It ... I ... I can’t remember what happened next. You were here. And ...”

“How did you find him so fast?”

This seemed to pull Dukki out of a spiral. He smiled again and tapped at the side of his head.

“I’m a tracker! There’s no one can out fox me!”

“It was a brave thing to do.” Elvin said with a smile.

“It was a foolish thing to do!” snapped the captain, “Why would you go straight for the necromancer? And on your own! We could have

used your help and you wouldn't have nearly gotten yourself killed!"

Dukki hung his head regretfully. "I thought I could take him. An old man like him. What was he going to do?"

The captain rolled her eyes.

Dukki lifted his head again as realisation dawned.

"I ... I was dying? Who saved me?"

"The warden captain saved your life, Dukki," said Elvin smiling,

The young man leant forward, bowing as best he could to her.

"I owe you my life. I hope I can repay you for that."

"If you'd just show a little more respect for it, that would be a start." She said, a smile beginning to form on her face. She reached a hand down and pulled him up.

"What do we do now?" He asked, stretching.

“Now,” Elvin said with a smile, ”we end this.”

Dukki picked up his great sword. The blade glinted in the lantern light.

“That sounds like my sort of plan!”

He leapt into the night and the other two followed him off into the darkness.

# End of the Line

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Dukki, Elvin and the Warden Captain ran through the brush. Far away, a faint grey light seemed to be drawing its way across the distant horizon. Dawn was not too far off. Dukki stopped several times, checking the ground then changing direction sharply or sometimes leaping forwards again as he had before.

“This way!” He shouted.

The others followed him closely.

After a matter of minutes they came to a clearing. In the centre of it they could make out the clear shapes of two people. Elvin raised his hands and halted the other two as they looked at the scene in front of them.

In the growing light they could see Siris standing in the centre looking right at them. His eyes were once again black pits. He stared at the three of them and laughed a dark,

harsh laugh. Behind him, Derville was still held by the glowing chains. A mix of anger and terror on her face.

“You’re too late! You know that. Yes? Too late!” Siris cackled and raised his hands above his head. Sparks of blue and green crackled at his fingertips.

They all then watched in horror as oozing black puddles of what they had thought was mud began foaming around him in the clearing. Out of each of the puddles arose what looked like grim, humanoid shapes. Tall, terrible and grotesque. A foul smell reeked from them as they stepped out of the mud and began lumbering forwards. Their mouths opened and glowing fangs glared up at the three as they looked on!

A deep howling filled the forest, echoing from tree to tree.

“Kill them! Kill them all!” shouted Siris from behind them. “Don’t leave anyone alive!”



Just then, a blast of red-hot flames shot past Elvin and Dukki. They each dropped to a crouch as they saw a fireball erupt and ram into one of the dark creatures. Immediately, its tarry body erupted into bright flames and it screeched in agony.

Turning back they saw the captain, hastily pouring another cartridge into her wand.

“What are you standing there for?” She shouted. “Those things aren’t that strong yet! Get them before they’re fully formed!”

Elvin turned to Dukki. “Are you ready for this?” He said with a smile.

Dukki was growling under his breath.

“Oh I’m ready!” He said, anger in his eyes and a wide grin on his face.

“Together?” Elvin nodded.

“Together!” Dukki nodded back.

The two of them leapt from kneeling, bringing their swords up as they

came. Holding a tight formation they moved between the dark creatures one-by-one hacking and cleaving their way.

As they moved, flashes of bright light erupted around them as the captain continued to fire her wand.

As they approached Siris though, two of the creatures pushed between them, missing Elvin but dragging Dukki to the ground.

Elvin paused.

“Don’t stop!” Dukki yelled, grappling the beasts. “Get him!”

Elvin turned back to Siris. He looked at the vile man and anger filled his eyes. He ran forward, raising his sword high above his head.

Just as Dukki had described, the necromancer – with a flick of his wrists – caused streaks of cold light to form through the air that whipped down at Elvin. Elvin knew what needed to be done though and he

focussed all his strength as he brought down his sword.

As it moved, the cold steel seemed to split and reform into eight shining, ghostly blades. They cut through the whips and Elvin pushed forward as the sword reformed and buried itself in Siris' chest.

The necromancer fell to his knees, blood spilling onto the grass beneath him.

The chains that had been holding Derville fizzled into nothingness and she ran over. She hugged Elvin then turned on her captor. Kneeling down, she punched him hard in the face.

He seemed to drop something onto the ground but Elvin was too busy looking back at Dukki.

The young man had freed himself and was walking over, swinging his great sword and whistling.

Elvin saw as well that the other wardens had all congregated

towards the sounds of combat. The captain was lining them up then made her way over.

“So, you’ve got him them, eh?” she said smiling.

“That’s right, we ...” Elvin began. His expression sank as he looked at her though. She was holding her wand toward Derville. “... What are you doing?” He shouted.

“Arresting a thief!” Replied the captain coldly. “Don’t be fooled by her looks! She’s wanted in Alsager ... and I’m going to collect the bounty.”

“Captain, you can’t! She ...”

At that moment though, the captain’s wand fell fast to the ground as she was pulled backwards by her ankle. She landed hard and cried out in pain.

Siris was laughing.

Elvin turned sharply and raised his sword again.

“Too late!” said Siris, and cackled feebly, “You and your companions belong to me now!”

Then, Elvin saw something he had hoped he would never see again. He shuddered as twisted spirits came up through the ground and sank into the captain and her wardens.

“No. No!” He shouted. He ran towards the wardens. Dukki stayed close behind him. Their eyes turned a dark black and their mouths opened silently as they began marching forward. Turning back towards Siris, Elvin and Dukki saw that he was standing again. Dark smoke billowed from him as he laughed.

The two of them swung their swords to fend off the possessed wardens.

“Fight your way out of this one, lieutenant! You don’t have a platoon to throw away this time!”

Elvin and Dukki stood side-by-side again and they each held their sword

fast in front. The sounds of more of the wardens' footsteps were fast approaching from all sides. They could not take out the whole group. And even if they could, these were innocent people! Elvin knew what they had to do.

“There’s nothing for it, they are not good odds but we need to rush him.” He said gravely.

“Together?” Dukki smiled.

“Together!”

They leapt forward, skidded and came to a halt in the mud. What was going on? Siris' face was suddenly gripped in sheer agony. He twisted and fell to the ground, lifeless, a hatchet sticking out of his back.

Behind him, Derville smiled.

# The Morning After

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The sun rose on the Tavern. Birds sang and small animals began their daily toil. The living world seemed almost oblivious to the events of the last night. Inside, Elvin woke up from his short, albeit deep, sleep. On the table beside his bed, his sword lay in its scabbard. He sat up, rubbed his eyes then rose and dressed for the day. He hummed a tune to himself as he buttoned his long coat and slung his sword belt round, fastening it into place.

He made his way out of the room and down the stairs. He could smell frying bacon and toasting bread along with the rich smell of brewing coffee. He smiled. Even through the pain and bruising, he felt happy to start the day.

The large room, filled with its tables and chairs, seemed oddly empty. A

few people were working the bar and bringing out food and drinks but apart from that there were only a handful of tables occupied. At one, Elvin saw a group of wardens. They each had dressings and slings from the night's fighting. At another, he saw the captain and her sergeant, Boris. The enormous man appeared to be trying to crack a boiled egg.

At the last table he saw Dukki and Derville. They seemed to be deep in conversation.

“Take a seat, sir! I’ll be right over to you!” A woman called to Elvin. He hesitated for a moment but Dukki pointed to an empty seat at their table so he made his way over and sat down.

After a short while, a plate of food was brought over and Elvin began eating.

The three of them continued their breakfast quietly for some time then, as Elvin was about to clear his plate



and make his way back upstairs, Dukki spoke.

“So where are you heading now, Lieutenant?”

Elvin was slightly taken aback.

“I am not really sure, to be honest with you.” He thought for a moment. “I was heading towards Crail but, frankly, I am not sure that I want to.” He leant back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. “I might head down to the coast. See if I can find a ship. I hear sailing is a lot more relaxing than soldiering.”

Just then, Elvin lowered his head as he heard footsteps approaching. He turned to see the captain heading over to their table.

“Good morning, Lieutenant!” She said with a smile, wincing only slightly from a pain in her bandaged arm. “Thank you for your work last night.”

“You are very welcome, captain.” He smiled, then memory dawned. “Last night, you were about to ... ?”

“That reminds me.” The captain turned on Derville. “Ms Anyth.”

Derville sat bolt upright, staring at the captain. Tensed as if ready to run.

“Yes?”

“Your conduct last night was, extraordinary. If it weren’t for your quick action my wardens and I would be ... well ... we wouldn’t be ... if you catch my meaning.” The captain placed a small piece of folded parchment on the table. “This is a pardon.”

Derville looked shocked.

“It’s only for Alsager, mind you! And it’s only a pardon, not a warrant or a license for any more of your past ... behaviour.”

Derville picked up the letter and looked it over. She smiled.

The captain smiled too.

“I think you deserve a second chance.” The captain winced again at the pain in her arm. “And besides .... There are worse things in this world than thieves.”

She made her way back to the other wardens and soon after they funnelled out. The sound of cart-wheels and horses’ hooves could be heard outside and Elvin, Dukki and Derville found themselves alone.

“The sea, eh?” Dukki said, stretching his long arms and leaning back in his chair. “I hear that can be dangerous, you know.”

Elvin smiled.

“So I gather.”

“I expect you could do with ... protection ... taking on a journey like that.”

Elvin laughed.

“I expect I could.” He stood up and straightened out his uniform. “I

cannot pay you well ... or ... at all for that matter. You know, a military pension does not exactly cover much and .... well ... a lord I may be, technically, but I do not have a fortune.”

Dukki smiled and stood up.

“Don’t worry, sir,” he performed a comically stiff salute. “I can find my own pay along the way.”

The two men turned to walk away as Elvin suddenly stopped and looked down at his belt. Where was ... ?

There was a quiet laugh behind them.

Derville was holding the sheathed sword and examining the hilt closely.

“It seems you could both do with someone that can keep a watchful eye.” She said, smiling. “I’m not looking for charity though. I hope you understand that. It was just ... nice ... having someone who missed

me when I went missing. If you know what I mean.”

Elvin walked over. Derville handed him his sword.

“Ms Anyth, anyone that can take out a necromancer ...” he thought then added “... and that can disarm a trained lieutenant so easily too! ... would be a valuable ally indeed.” He smiled.

The three of them gathered their things and made their way outside.

The sun was shining brightly through the leaves above and the air seemed somehow fresher this morning than it had the night before.

“Do either of you know a good marching song?” Elvin asked, shouldering his pack.

“Can’t say I was ever one for singing.” Dukki said with a laugh.

“No, more of a dancer I suppose.” Elvin laughed as well.

Derville's voice cut the air as she began to sing "Twenty I got for selling my coat, twenty for selling my blanket ..."

Elvin joined in. He knew the song well.

Dukki hopped a dance beside them as they made their way down the path together.

"Poor old soldier, poor old soldier ..."

The sound of the song drifted through the air.

The three companions made their way down the path.

There was a whole world out there to explore, and they were off to see it.