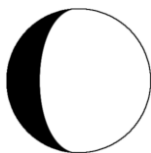


April 1



I

## Rake's Progress

**H**askell fled the dockside tavern with the girl in tow. He led her, laughing, across the shadowy quay to an alcove in a stone-fronted warehouse. Her face was stained a ghostly blue in the light of an arcane lamppost, its dancing azure flame held within a twisted iron frame. She was beautiful, and her eyes sparkled with desire.

So why couldn't he remember her name? He was so good with names but couldn't remember hers. Strange, but he wouldn't let that get in the way. "Admit it," he whispered. "You're a nymph crawled from the sea to tempt me." He stooped and brushed his lips along the slope of her neck.

She giggled and gazed at him greedily, lacing her delicate fingers over his bloody knuckles, cut against the bony face of a sailor in the tavern. Sailors didn't like tall Southron folk, even one born in the High City. The girl, though, didn't seem like a regular of such seedy dockside establishments. She had nursed her drink, not gulped it, and the weave of her dress was too fine; not as fine as Haskell's white tunic or short, oxblood surcoat, but neither was it commoner's rough-spun. No, she had to be a shopkeeper's daughter out for a bit of adventure.

He was happy to oblige.

"I... never—" she began. He drew her close and kissed her, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and kissed her throat. She moaned,

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her breath hot in his ear, and fumbled for his belt. He slid his hand up her skirt. Her eagerness was an elixir to him, a validation he could find nowhere else.

“Feckless scoundrel. I knew I would find you here,” Master Slade said, his reedy voice dripping with venom.

Haskell sneered over his shoulder, his passion sinking like a man drowning at sea. The girl gasped and huddled against him.

Master Slade, bent by age, wore a mantle of dignity over his fine robes and a look of contempt on his sagging face. Behind him, the tidy rigging of moored ships glowed in the lamplight like the corded webs of titanic spiders. “Imbecile. I told you to work out those invoices by moonrise.”

The girl ran. Haskell reached for her, but the silver pommel of Slade’s cane rang off the wall in front of him. She vanished around the corner.

“Damn it, Master, she—”

“Was your true love? I suppose you left your coin purse in the tavern?”

Haskell clutched the cut purse-strings at his waist. He grinned. She was good but hadn’t needed to rob him; he would have taken her anywhere, bought her anything just to have her. It didn’t matter if her desire was hollow, that she gave it at all was enough.

Slade’s cane hammered Haskell’s jaw, the pain a flash of light and a vibratory thud. He went sprawling onto the cobbled street. Slade shook his cane in Haskell’s face. “You bring only shame on your family, waste every opportunity—”

“Opportunistic thievery,” Haskell muttered while fingering his jaw.

“What?” Slade growled.

“Usurers and moneylenders have nothing on you, *Master*. I delivered your message to Joshua, that was enough work for me.” The memory was bitter: old Joshua’s chin trembling with indignation as he crumpled Slade’s message. In a fortnight, his ships

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would be auctioned to pay debts that had come due at just the wrong moment. Slade had arranged everything as neatly as his ledgers, and Haskell's father had bribed the right people. It was a brilliantly contemptible scheme.

Haskell looked out over the mirrored water of the bay. Khul, the High City, was overflowing with corrupt merchants and preening, backbiting nobles. The cheating, the gossip, the thievery cloaked as business; it was a game they happily played with other people's lives.

The thought of returning to his cramped office and hunching over the tiny desk in Slade's rat-infested warehouse, of enduring the incessantly dripping ceiling—each drip a steady measure of his wasted youth—was too much. Penning today's transactions would make the sordid business real; worse, it would make him indelibly complicit. He wouldn't do it. Not tonight. Maybe never again.

Slade looked skyward and sighed. "It's Joshua's fault—I can't be held responsible for the fool's lack of fiscal foresight. Have I taught you nothing? Gods know I've tried where your father failed."

"Father's nothing. My grandfather—"

"Your grandfather was a shiftless rake, like you."

"My grandfather was a hero. He broke the orcs. They wrote songs about him. You and father are cowards. Cheats." He pointed to the corner around which the girl had fled. "At least she had the courage to face her mark, not rob him via messenger."

Slade drove his cane into Haskell's chest, its silvered end driving between his ribs, as if the grizzled shipwright was trying to pierce Haskell's heart. "I will beat sense into you, boy, or kill you trying."

Something splintered inside Haskell. Not in his head or chest—something lower. Deeper. A creeping fire filled him, its heat making him shake and filling his mouth with ferric rage. He looked up, slowly, along the haft of Slade's polished cane, past the

## Rake's Progress

wrinkled, calloused hands, and into the old man's hateful eyes. The iron heat only grew.

He swept Slade's cane aside, the implement clattering away into the night, and rose above his shrinking master. Haskell became a puppet of rage, his limbs jerked to violence by strings of loathing. In a half-crazed moment, he repaid years of Slade's brutality. He struck his old master without thought of consequence, only justice, and in a heady outpouring of hate, drove him to the water's edge.

And over the side.



Haskell ran uphill. He didn't know how he got there, only that he had left behind the squalor of the docks. He was surrounded by the stately homes of merchants and artisans: foothills of opulence below soaring granite mansions, each a pale mountain in the light of the waxing gibbous moon.

He stole into a cobbled backyard and glanced around, breathing hard and massaging his throbbing jaw. At least the shaking had stopped. The old bastard was probably alive. Probably. Part of him didn't care, but the City Guard would. They would be after him soon.

He crept to a shed abutting the house's back wall and gazed at a dark, second-storey window. It was high, but he could reach it. He had before. Its owner was a trader who had risen to prominence on the necks of better men and women: Haskell's father. Everyone would be asleep.

He clambered onto the shed, its mossy, slanted roof creaking under his weight. Reaching up, he blindly worked his stiletto between the windowsill and catch. He twisted the slim blade up and down, left and right, the window groaning as cold steel splintered old wood. A sharp crack echoed in the yard as the blade and latch broke.

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The jolt caused his heel to splinter the weather-softened roof, and he tipped backward. Flailing for balance, he caught the frame with his fingertips, gripping the carved stone with his nails to stay upright. He steadied himself, looked at the fractured dagger, and swore. The stiletto had been a gift from his sister when he left to apprentice under Slade. She had been his only ally in the family after their mother died, the only one to treat him with anything but scorn. He set the broken dagger on the shed's roof. None of that mattered now.

He hauled himself up, held his taut body in place with one forearm, and pushed the window open with the other. He reached into the room and tumbled inside. His heel rattled the frame and his arm collided with a side table, knocking a heavy wood carving onto the floor with a bang. He grimaced but remained still.

Nothing stirred in the house.

He pulled himself up by the edge of a large mahogany desk. His father had stacked ledgers on the desktop, one slim volume open for review over morning mead. How many times had he faced the disapproving man over that desk? A hundred; a thousand? He rifled the desk drawers, taking in the study as he worked. Two wing-backed chairs faced the desk at a fastidious angle and the walls were lined with glass-fronted bookshelves, everything meticulously arranged to convey wealth and authority.

Only he couldn't find the bloody wealth.

"Where is it?" he hissed while rattling the last locked drawer. It had to be inside. He growled and swept the stack of ledgers to the floor.

Haskell stalked to the wall, from which he took a long sword in a battered scabbard. He drew the weapon, pausing to admire its sharp, oiled blade in the pale moonlight. He ran his thumb over the cross-guard, its metal worn by his grandfather's hand, and admired the protective runes inscribed along the blade and the blood-red garnets in its pommel. Haskell, Son of Eskil the

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Younger, Son of Eskil Orc-breaker. A proud lineage, at least from the outside.

He reversed the sword and worked its tip into the locked drawer.

"I don't think grandfather would take kindly to you abusing his sword, though he would approve of your motive," his older sister chided from the doorway.

Haskell glanced up and frowned; though of all the household, he was glad it was Hilda. Her dark braid trailed down the front of a fine silk nightgown. Her face was hard, but her eyes sparkled with amusement, like she was silently laughing at a private joke. They undercut, very slightly, the cold precision she inherited from their father. She gripped a long dagger in her right hand and looked more than capable of using it.

"Where's the bastard keep his coin?" he demanded.

"Our *father* keeps his coin in that very drawer, but I will not have you ruin such fine furniture."

Hilda padded across the carpet and took Haskell's chin in her left hand, turning his face to examine his bruised jaw in the moonlight. At six feet, she was taller than most men, but Haskell had surpassed her years ago. She shook her head and pushed his chin aside. "Four years of apprenticeship to a worthy shipwright, yet you persist in your disobedience. Or was this another backroom brawl?"

Haskell scowled at her insight as much as her respect for Slade. "Worthy? He teaches more about brutality than ships."

Hilda sighed. "The world is harder than your master's cane."

"I know that."

"You know nothing," she muttered. "Father—"

"Is a coward."

Hilda shook her head. "He is hard but sensible. You, however, bludgeon your way through life. The world will never match your naïve view of it, Haskell." She swept across the room and opened

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a bookcase. Running a finger along the spines, she removed a volume on noble houses and retrieved a small silver key hidden between its pages. She tossed the key to Haskell. "This is a mistake and the last time I help you."

He caught the key and scowled. "It's different for you—you're his favourite. You play his games. I..." He kicked a piece of chalk that had fallen on the floor; it skittered past the carving he had toppled. Fangs filled the oaken dragon's gaping jaws, its tongue curling up to lick its nose. Intricately carved knotted lines formed its scales, paint clinging to the recesses. Its raised surfaces were hard worn by the wind and waves of the briny sea.

Haskell had adored the heavy sculpture as a child, had run his little fingers over its details. He had imagined the prow it once adorned, the fierce raiders crowding the deck of its longship. He would sneak into his father's office, take down his grandfather's heavy sword, and dream of life outside the city, of winning renown fighting orcs and trolls. He had begged to be told tales of how his grandfather had ceased raiding to fight, of his battles and adventures, his highs and lows, but Haskell's father wouldn't spoil his boy with worthless words or wasted affection. His family wanted to bury their past. They were merchants now, not brigands. He heard those very words in his father's disdainful baritone.

He picked up the carving in both hands and set it on the open ledger, its weight crinkling the fine paper. He stooped and inserted the silver key into the locked drawer. It turned with a heavy, well-oiled click.

"You cannot stay in the city after this," Hilda said. "What life will you make for yourself?"

He lifted a sturdy leather pouch from the drawer, heavy with gold and silver that clinked softly inside. "I'll go to the borderlands with one of the caravans. To Branthall. I'll be out of Father's reach there and sign on with the Questers Guild."

Hilda scoffed. "As a mercenary? There is no glory left in the

## Rake's Progress

borderlands. The old wars are over, and the Questers Guild is a relic for drunks and failures.”

Haskell rammed his grandfather's sword into its scabbard. “Then I should fit right in. I'll make my fortune honestly, fighting Darkwood monsters like grandfather did.”

“You only know half his story. Grandfather could be cruel, especially to Father.”

Haskell buckled on the sword and pouch. “You and Father wouldn't tell me.”

“He fears you will become his father. You're certainly wilful enough.”

Haskell put one leg through the open window and sat heavily on the sill. She didn't understand. How could she? They didn't want the same things. He didn't fit in her world.

“What will you do when you run out of coin?” she asked.

Haskell slapped his thighs and flashed her a cheerful smile. “I'll just keep the coin flowing.”

Hilda laughed despite herself. “You're a fool, Haskell.”

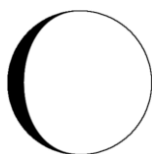
“Don't let Father miss me too much.” He flashed an impish grin and slipped away.

“He will only miss his coin,” she said.

Haskell jogged through deserted moonlit streets. He had to get through the gates before word of his theft and assault spread. With one hand on his new pouch and the other steadying his sword, he was sure of only two things: the road would be long, and there was no going back.



April 2



II

## Bodies in Motion

Haskell peered out of the roadside inn's bay window, its warped glass turning the tree-lined highway into a twisted caricature of stones and branches and sky. No doubt about it, a rider was approaching. Haskell heard hooves clapping over weathered cobbles laid by the slaves of a long dead empire. He had hurried over those same stones all night and day, chased by the spectre of a vengeful posse or messenger sent to raise a hue and cry against him.

The rider drew closer. Their armour gleamed in the light of the lowering sun.

Haskell downed his beer and gripped the worn old pack, bedroll, and supplies he had bought from the innkeeper. If he had to run, he would run. If he had to fight...

A line of people came behind the rider: a train of walkers, riders, wagons, and carriages travelling along the wide river swollen by winter melt and spring rain. A caravan so soon? What luck! They must have set out shortly after he did. But then, had they heard about him? He had bribed the gate guards to forget they had seen him, but they wouldn't stand up to any sort of questioning.

He rose, stooping to avoid the broad beams overhead, and turned to the bulbous-nosed innkeeper hunched over the counter. "You're in luck, a caravan just arrived."

“Bless th’ gods. Are there rich merchants among ’em?” she said.

Haskell nearly choked. Of course there were; merchants of Khul setting out to ply their trade for the season. He was such an idiot. He cleared his throat and crossed to the bar, trying to force an air of calm over his rising panic. He looked down a hallway and through the open back door to a stand of bare poplars beyond the yard. “I think I’ll go for a stroll, good lady,” he said cheerfully.

The innkeeper let out a bronchial laugh. “Lady, he says. Have you decided if you’ll be needin’ a bed tonight, *my lord?*” she said with a toothless grin. “You’ll be in fine comp’ny, I’m sure—rubbin’ elbows in a big bed with a few rich merchants. Could be some profit in it for a bright young lad.”

Haskell started down the hall, his blistered heels and toes chafing inside tall boots that felt full of blood. He had never walked so far in his life and wanted nothing more than to lay down on a nice, soft straw mattress; but discretion demanded otherwise. “Don’t hold a spot on my account. The weather’s fine enough to sleep outside.”

“It’ll be as cold as a devil’s behind come nightfall, but suit yourself,” she said doubtfully.

Haskell crossed the yard, the weathered brown cloak for which he had overpaid billowing behind as he made the stand of poplars. He drew up his patched, dark green hood and crouched behind an evergreen shrub, the tip of his scabbard digging a channel in the wet earth. A warrior in a suit of steel plate rode toward the inn atop a dappled white charger.

He looked absolutely regal; his brass-traced armour glowed in the failing light and a fine crimson cloak billowed from his shoulders. Haskell imagined himself in the warrior’s place, only leading a fighting company against fearsome Darkwood monsters. He laid a hand on his pouch. Soon.

## Bodies in Motion

A youth slightly younger than Haskell cantered by astride a tall bay mare. He was dressed in a velvet tunic dyed a vibrant sapphire blue; his fitted, well-oiled boots shone in the sun and the fine gold chain about his shoulders clinked with every bounce of his steed. The mare was huge, at least fifteen hands (five feet) from hoof to withers. Struggling to keep up was a fat merchant bedecked in an embarrassment of gold, the metal jouncing and jostling conspicuously as he rode a smaller but spectacularly glossy black stallion.

All three passed in front of the inn. Haskell did not recognize any of them, though there was something naggingly familiar about the large merchant, who matched the youth. He suspected they were father and son.

Minutes later, Ethan, the innkeeper's lame, middle-aged son with a face covered in boils, came limping into the yard. He held the reins of the charger and stallion, which he began to cool down.

Haskell slipped through the trees to inspect the rest of the caravan. He might be able to travel with them after all. There was no shortage of merchants in the kingdom, and his father's circle were a chiefly seafaring lot, and not all of them knew Haskell, Eskil's shame. No, it was the caravan or nothing. While the land hereabout might be relatively safe, strolling alone through the Lakewood laden with treasure was a fine way to buy a shallow grave.

He broke from the trees with his head down and pack over one shoulder. Walking back along the road, he scanned the travellers' tired faces as they hurried to get a good spot close to the inn. The caravan was large—maybe one hundred people. He saw guards, traders, farmers, shepherds, messengers; no one he recognized. His excitement grew.

He approached a messenger standing by a chestnut horse. The man wore the red and black livery of a noble and had well-oiled and turned-out gear. Haskell wished he had paid attention during heraldry lessons. "Ho, friend. What news from Khul? You set out,

what, this morning?”

“As soon as the sun broke the horizon,” the messenger said.

“All’s quiet in the city?”

“As quiet as ever. A child was struck down and killed by a cart this morning.”

“Ah, that’s a shame. Anything happening around the docks? My sister lives that way, and I don’t get into the city as much as I should.”

The messenger shrugged. “Things are always a bit rough dockside, but I haven’t heard anything unusual. Sorry I can’t tell you more.”

Haskell shut his eyes and sighed, a wave of relief washing away his tension and anxiety. Word of his crimes hadn’t reached them.

“I’m sure she’s fine, especially if she’s as sturdy as you,” the messenger said, mistaking Haskell’s relief for worry.

“You’re right, she can handle herself,” Haskell said with a wry grin. “Your caravan’s captain—he’s the one I saw at the head of the line?”

“Yes, Captain Nedir. I saw him go into the inn, which is where I’m headed. Come along if you like. I’ll take a bed as long as one’s on offer—it’s a long way to Siward.”

Haskell clapped the messenger’s arm. “You poor bastard. Let me buy you a beer.”

It was getting smoky in the inn, which was packed with the wealthiest travellers. They were smoking, drinking, eating, and talking of trade and politics. Haskell kept his hood up just in case. He kept fidgeting with the hilt of his sword, which was in front of him on a corner table.

“So, you want to join up? Know how to use that longsword?” Captain Nedir asked. Divested of armour and wearing a worn pair of hose and a belted, midnight-blue jacket, Nedir still struck an

impressive figure. Much shorter than Haskell, he was broad-chested and strong-backed, his body moulded by the tools and deeds of a lifetime of soldiering. His face and hands were scarred from countless duels, and his brown eyes seemed to look right through Haskell.

Haskell became keenly aware of his inexperience, of how his battered sword had seen more combat. He routinely passed for a boyish man, could boast and carouse with the best of them, and gods knew he could hold his own in a fight, but not on a battlefield. He had the sudden urge to apologize, push the sword across the table, and leave. Eskill's sword belonged to a real warrior, not him. What did blood count for in the face of Nedir's poise and experience?

Haskell fought down his mad, fearful urges. "I had some lessons in Khul but learned more in its streets," he said with all the conviction he could muster. He raised his mug to display the recent scabs and old scars on his right hand.

Nedir's gaze briefly flitted to Haskell's hand and a wry grin crossed his lips.

Haskell sipped his beer and gazed at the patrons reflected in the warped windowpanes.

"What's your name, son?" Nedir asked.

This was it: if Nedir had heard of Haskell's crimes or he was recognized by someone in the room, it was over. He made to speak but choked on his drink, rising from his chair, and launching into a fit of wet coughs.

"Easy there," Nedir said, rising to slap him on the back.

Haskell felt ten years old. He sat down and pushed himself deeper into the corner. Clearing his throat and drinking more beer, he tried to ignore the curious looks and derisive laughs from the other patrons.

"Boy can't hold his spirits!" the fat, blue-velveted merchant

bellowed from the opposite corner. His son craned his neck to gawk at Haskell. The youth's mirth was plain, but something else was in his expression. Was it recognition?

Haskell took a deep breath. He had to get it together; he was better than this. He straightened and tried to assume a carefree manner, chuckling at his own awkwardness. "I'm Haskell, Eskil's Son," he said with a cough.

Nedir's brows knit together. He scrutinized Haskell's sword: its garnet-encrusted pommel, worn guard, and the rune-inscribed throat of its scabbard. He cocked his head and regarded Haskell. "That would make you the Orc-breaker's great-grandson?"

"Grandson. I am son of Eskil, Eskil's son."

"Hm, I had you pegged as a thief fleeing the law with a stolen sword."

Haskell laughed a little too eagerly. His relief was overwhelming. Slade and Haskell's father were careful; they might even hush up Haskell's crimes to maintain respectability. His father was probably counting his blessings to be rid of his profligate son.

"Where are you headed?" Nedir said.

Haskell glanced up. "Hm? Oh, to Lanesford and Branthall. I want to become a Quester."

Nedir chuckled. "Young and foolhardy. There's no shortage of questers headed south to fight, even in these peaceable times. Our itinerary takes us through the Lakewood to Branthall. I'm surprised you didn't sign on with us in Khul."

Haskell shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, well, I thought it would be more adventurous to set out alone. I thought better of it after a day's travel."

"Good. There are enough dangers on the road, even for a well-guarded caravan. You should join my company. We head to Shadowcourt from Branthall—you could see King Ferdinand."

"Thank you, but I want a company like my grandfather. To

finish what he started, you could say.”

“You want it all in one go, eh? Careful you don’t get more than you can handle.”

Haskell expected hard fights, dark dungeons, and trackless wilderness. What more could there be? “Did you fight in the Darkwood, Captain?”

“I did my time in that forest—it is aptly named.”

Haskell frowned at Nedir’s vague answer. “I can’t wait. I’ve dreamt of fighting the old enemy since I was a boy. Khul’s politics and double-dealing are too much for me.”

“You’ll find Lanesford a different place now, Haskell. It’s a hard place full of hard people. There’s little glory left in the borderlands.”

“You sound like my sister.”

“She sounds wise. Vagabonds and Guild-traitors dog my caravans now, not monsters of old. In that regard alone do I miss the war; the common purpose.”

“Guild-traitors?”

“Those who have violated the tenets of the Questers Guild. Rogue Questers, you might call them. Or bandits. They fight for themselves and take what they want.”

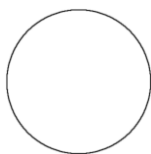
Haskell nodded. “I’m equal to the danger.”

Nedir gave him a long look and smiled. “Have it your way, son. You will learn, as I did.” He leaned back. “You can travel with us and eat with the other guards so long as you help mind the caravan, but I can’t pay you.”

Haskell nodded. The security of a caravan and food for the journey? It was more than he had hoped for.

Nedir signalled the innkeeper’s son for another drink. “A word of advice, Haskell. Stay out of Branthall politics. There’s more intrigue in that town than a weak king’s court.”

April 4



III

## Mean Streets

Froba was hungry. *Really* hungry. She clutched her grumbling tummy through a tattered, two-seasons-too-small tunic, its left sleeve parted from the shoulder and frayed hem getting uncomfortably short. She sat on the trampled earth at the end of a narrow alley, hugged her scabby knees, and gazed listlessly at the mud-caked wattle-and-daub wall across from her.

The afternoon was wearing on and Branthall's shops were closing. She listened to the echoing footsteps of people walking down cobbled Main Street at the alley's far end. They were headed to the inn and Questers Guild outside Southgate. Froba's territory.

The long winter was over, and the ground was finally hardening. Scores of fighters, thieves, wizards, and mercenaries would soon campaign into the wilds. That required new arms and armour, mended gear, provisioning, and a host of other transactions: the business of war. More importantly, it meant new faces and easy marks.

Froba tossed a silver crown in the air and tucked it in her pouch. It had been a good day with lots of traffic and plenty of drunks; folk were in high spirits with summer around the corner. Early planting had started, and coin was flowing—right into her fingers. She needed adventurers like shepherds needed sheep, and Ferd would be after her for his share of the wool. If she didn't do enough fleecing, he would make her more than hungry.



A chorus of youthful shouts from the south side of town startled Froba, and she bumped the back of her head against the wall. She leaped to her feet and ducked down an alley, creeping toward the commotion. A bent old crone hurried in the other direction. Froba shimmed along a wall and peered around the corner.

A narrow side street sloped sharply downhill, past cramped shacks with fenced yards in which pigs snuffled and scrawny chickens pecked. Near the bottom, a gang of older youths savagely kicked a smaller boy. He managed to scabble away, leaving one of his attackers holding a shred of brown tunic, and scrambled up the slope. His eyes and mouth were wide with terror. The jeering youths sent rocks and shouts of “greenskin” and “mullorc” after him.

Froba knew them, a gang of toughs from the Tannery, the lowest, filthiest part of town. She didn’t know their victim. He wasn’t human, not entirely; he was squat and had grey-green skin, wide-set hazel eyes, a small, flat nose, and a monstrously wide mouth with pitted, snake-like lips. A half-orc, more orc than boy by the look of him.

He shot past Froba, who stepped out to face the gang. “Hey, toads, this is Ferd’s turf. Ye want him to drown ye in yer piss pot?”

The boys stopped but kept up their jeers and insults. The biggest stepped forward. Brent was his name. “We ain’t scared o’ Ferd,” Brent sneered.

“Yeah? Why don’t ye come up here an’ say that?”

He took another step but hesitated.

“Yeah, thought so. Better get back to it or it’ll be yer da’s drownin’ ye.”

“At least we got folks. Go squat in yer alley an’ cry yerself to sleep. Maybe Ferd’ll come tuck ye in!” Brent said. The other boys mockingly blubbered and rubbed their eyes.

Froba spat, crossed her arms, and glared at them, maintaining a brave front despite their fiendishly accurate barbs.

“Watch yer back, ye sow,” Brent said, kicking a fat pig for emphasis. It hobbled away squealing while Brent tramped after his cackling mates.

Froba knew he was full of shit, but she couldn’t afford a big head. They were all getting bigger, and things didn’t stay the same in Branthall for long. If Brent won a spot topside she could wind up in trouble. He was mean enough to pull it off, too.

She turned to regard the half-orc crouched behind a rain barrel and sniffing wetly. Why had she helped him? She’d never done so for others in a similar spot. Ferd didn’t like his irregulars mixing or taking up with others. He preferred to pit them against one another, and gods help anyone who tried to go straight. No one could hide in Branthall. Not for long.

This one wasn’t one of Ferd’s. He looked too soft, like a lost pup. “Ye sure ye ain’t no half-goblin? Half-orcs are supposed to be big an’ tough. Yer all scrawny.”

“I dunno—shut up,” he said, wiping his nose and smearing blood across his cheek.

“Ye can always go back downhill if ye’d rather.”

“No!”

“I don’t know, maybe ye’ll grow into it,” she muttered, scratching her chin; a half-orc might come in handy. “What’s yer name?”

“Orod.”

She jabbed her chest with a filthy thumb. “I saved yer life, so ye work fer me now. Got it?”

Orod nodded unhappily.

She brushed past him. “Good. Now, c’mon.” She could use someone to watch her back. He looked like a wimp, but it would be nice to have someone around for a change. Besides, she’d never had a friend.



Froba dragged Orod up Main Street’s uneven cobbles, dodging

sellers hawking charms and miracle cures, two disfigured mercenaries arguing the merits of spear length, and a spring lamb being led to slaughter. She pulled Orod aside three doors from the Market, causing him to splash barefoot through the gutter.

“Alright, ye gotta know the rules. Southgate’s my spot. Town square’s off limits ’cept for market days like today. Never work someone else’s spot or ye’ll get a knife in yer guts. Got it?”

“No,” Orod whimpered.

“Gods, yer dumb. Where’d ye come from anyhow?”

Orod pointed over his shoulder. “Westhill. Me mum used to make an’ mend.” His eyes began to well.

Froba turned away and sighed. “Don’t go blubberin’ again. What’m I gonna do with ye?”

“Who’s this milksop?” Ferd said. He stood over them, tall and lanky, like a malevolent scarecrow. Dark, oily hair dangled about his pox-scarred face. His cuirass was covered in black leather studded with steel in a repeating diamond pattern—hallmark of the Town Watch. He gazed contemptuously at Orod, one hand on his sheathed rondel dagger. “A gods-damned mullorc?”

“Th-this’ Orod,” Froba stuttered. “Them Tanners is getti—” Ferd grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up onto her toes, his fingers digging into her flesh.

“Tanners ain’t me concern. Money’s me concern,” he said through clenched teeth. Orod fell back a step, but Ferd grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him forward onto one knee. “What d’ye mean takin’ on this filth?”

“I need ’im to watch my back. Yer man Grig’s a half-orc, ain’t he?” Froba groaned.

Ferd knocked them together and threw Froba on top of Orod. “Don’t talk ’bout things ye know nuthin’ about.”

She rolled over. Ferd had her money bag in his hands. “Hey!” she cried, reaching for it.

Ferd gave her a savage backhand, sending her back onto Orod,

and tore open the bag. “A silver and six pennies? A halfwit with a hole in his purse’d turn up more in a week.” He threw the pouch in her face. “There’s two of ye now, so it’d better be a sovereign next week. I gave ye the sweetest plum, so make the most of it, or I’ll slit yer mullorc’s throat and see ye hang fer it.”

“But I ain’t never—”

Ferd thrust her down with the heel of his boot. “I’ve been soft on ye ’til now, and it shows. The first caravan’ll be through any day. Work ’em or I work ye, get it?”

“Got it.” Froba replied.

Ferd gave them each a glower. He sighed and looked down the street. “I dunno, maybe ye are too soft fer this work. Gods know I tried fer yer mum’s sake. Maybe one or two o’ them Tanners would take to it better.”

Froba surged up and clutched Ferd’s sleeve. “No, we’ll get it—I promise!” She had to. Without Ferd’s protection, she’d be as bad off as Orod. Every hungry brat would happily break her neck for a shot at Southgate. Forget living, the things she’d have to do to survive... She’d rather be dead.

Ferd looked at her and shrugged as if it was all out of his hands. “Make it a sovereign and maybe I’ll reconsider.” He pulled free of her desperate grip and trudged toward the market, muttering and shaking his head.

Froba had never stolen a whole gold sovereign before. It was an impossible amount. A sovereign would feed her and Orod like kings for a month. More than a month. That sort of coin didn’t disappear without a person noticing. She certainly wouldn’t make it begging, cheating adventurers in alley games, or palming pennies off tables.

She rubbed her reddened arm and hauled blubbering Orod to his feet. What was she going to do with the idiot? Use him as a decoy, maybe? He was pitiful enough for that. She prodded him down the busy street, her mind a muddle of what-ifs and what-

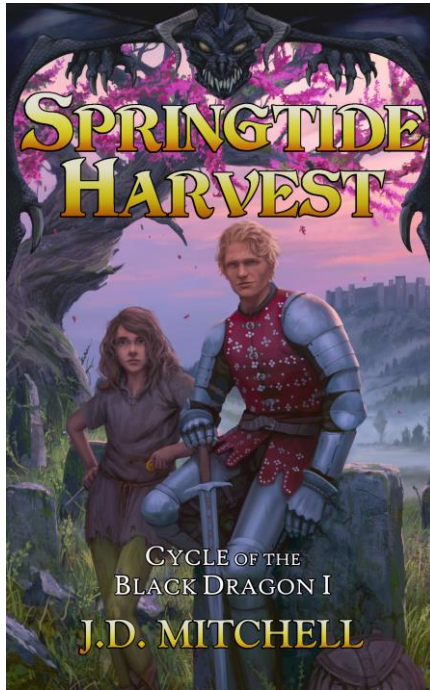
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