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THE TOWER OF THUNDER

by Jesse Alford

CHAPTER THREE

I was in no hurry to leave Whorl, but Brand seemed personally offended by deviations from itinerary, and had conducted nearly all his business by the end of our first full day in the farmhold. I'd never met a man more eager to get back on track to danger and hardship. Loring was kept busy with preparations for the harvest, Sloan spent all his time gathering herbs or tending to Reiftyr, and Reiftyr kept to his bed, shaking and moaning. Brand spoke with the heads of both households, arranged payments from the single cart we'd brought along, and saw to it that Loring understood Sloan was in charge.

He eventually declared everyone settled, and I told him we'd move out at dawn, which seemed to improve his mood, though he still stalked about like he hated the place. Brand may have actually had the necessary enthusiasm and derangement for a life of happy soldiering, though of course smiling about it was out of the question. Mather, was relieved to be getting away from Reiftyr's suffering. Sensitive boy, Mather, though he put on a stoic resolve that it was difficult not to admire.

Our first day on the road after Whorl seemed to assault the sensible lethargy native to man. Brand had, at my suggestion, dispensed with the drills and exercise typical of a Legion unit at rest, so as to not unduly stress our military nature and discomfit the locals. The side effect was, naturally, a generalized resentment when we returned to the road, a pang of loss at leaving behind less strenuous days. Mather was as quiet as ever, and Brand busied himself with the animals. We had no trouble the first few days.

The road surrendered all pretense of being an imperial highway three days north of Whorl, some way past the stone bridge over the Winterwash. We bypassed the bridge; my maps showed a seasonal ford that allowed us to avoid the reeves Baron Neor almost certainly had posted there, though the detour cost us our dry feet and about perhaps half a day. By the time we rejoined the road, it had become little more than rutted dirt track, wandering and at places overgrown. It was abundantly clear that whatever small effort Baron Neor put into maintaining roads, it did not extend much north of his own connection to the old imperial route. We managed, but the carts did not like it, and the mules liked it less. I estimated us to be a week still from the tower, and already four days behind schedule. We marched hard, leaving little time for me to continue my research; the fields would need to be prepared for winter wheat planting, and there was reason to believe that local help might be difficult to come by. I had no desire to be doing that work in the bitter cold of winter itself, and the fields had lain fallow for years. Urgency was reasonable, but I couldn't help but wonder if I wouldn't be better served by further study of Thunder before our arrival.

I didn't get a chance to change our pace, though; we ran into trouble on the road that significantly worsened our position. Some seventy-five years ago, there was a major spider cult to the north, outside Axenbough. The local militia was deeply involved, and the townsfolk of nearby Rotwood — charmingly named after the asylum the town grew up around — also may have had a hand in the despicable cult. They were harmless enough, until they broke a seal and unleashed the imprisoned creatures of Attarkhal on the north. Giant spiders and monsters with the shape of spiders but abilities and dispositions out of nightmare became a native feature of the land. Murgan, the first king of Four-Towns, did much to drive them off during the bloody dawn of that nation, and he had the assistance of Fifth Legion troops, church inquisitors (until the Brettians drove them out, anyway), and the famous Sir Immanual, his boon companion and one of the first famous converts to Illumi among the Tyrving. These heroes of legend cleansed the grove from which the beasts had come and re-sealed the leak from alien Attarkhal whence they issued, but they did not hunt the horrid beasts into extinction, to my great and continuing consternation. Had I been king of a new nation, with Fifth Legion cavalry, Sir Immanual and my own sorcery to command, not to mention an alliance with both the Black Swans and the famous General Royhau of the Bruderschoft Myrmidons, I would have scourged the eight-legged monsters off the face of the earth forever. The way I'd heard it told, Royhau wanted nothing more than to purge the damned spi-

ders from the earth – and when Murgan refused to make it a priority, Royhau left the north for good, taking his mercenaries and setting his sights on Hronddromma – and the rest was history.

As for Murgan, he instead indulged an obsession with teleportation spells, widely known to be impossible for mortal minds to cast. He vanished a few years later, likely a victim of his own flawed magic. *Magicians*.

Anyway, there were still giant spiders about in some woods. As we traveled longer hours, sometimes not stopping until the lack of sunlight made the twisting road too difficult to follow in the increasingly dense northern woods, Mather recalled this fact, and mentioned it to Brand.

Brand was a better soldier than I. He was older, braver, stronger, tougher, better in a fight. He was also, unfortunately and quite earnestly terrified by spiders. He crushed them mercilessly wherever he found them, his sole solace derived of the fact that they were so, so much smaller than him. He was profoundly uncomfortable in those dark woods, old stories circulating in his head — stories of blood-sucking beasts the size of a pony but decidedly less likely to delight little girls. I was said that some of them could fire their fangs through the air like harpoons, reeling in paralyzed prey from yards away. That came up, too.

Mather felt bad about it, but it also helped him come to terms with the fact that even the best soldiers were human. He needed to loosen up, and though Brand never caught him at it, his amused smiles at Brand's childish terror gave me hope that Mather might yet get soldiering figured out. A sense of humor was critical; without it, one eventually became little more than a cold killer, or at best, a particularly amoral day laborer in a sharp outfit. Humor and philosophy allowed a man to survive the horror of the worse battles without getting that way. They provided the flexibility that kept the steel from cracking. Mather was hard, and I needed him that way — but it also wouldn't do for him to crack. It was *almost* enough to get me to forgive Murgan for his oversight on the issue of giant fucking spiders. Not quite, though. See, I wasn't on good terms with the creatures myself, though I wasn't nearly as bad about it as Brand was. I'd had a run-in with spiders when serving in the Worldspine mountains - though they had been merely the size of cats. But that's a different story.

It was our sixth night out from Whorl and our second night in the deep forest that disaster struck. We had passed a suitable campsite a few hours before dusk, but had elected to press on; we had not found another. The road grew as dark and twisted as the forest surrounding us, and in places we had to clear fallen logs or

portage the carts over small streams. Brand was not his usual efficient self, instead jumping at every noise and constantly fingering his hilt. He marched with his shield out, and by then even Mather was beginning to get tired of it: Brand's solidity was one of the core strengths of the unit. Brand became convinced that something in the woods was watching us, keeping pace in the twisted undergrowth. Wind came in little gusts, and a light rain had been hassling us for hours, growing steadily heavier as the evening progressed. I couldn't hear anything aside from the weather, but Brand was convinced. I called a halt, and we all hoisted lanterns from the carts, peering into the surrounding murk.

"See anything, Mather?" I was all business. We could laugh about Brand's terror later, in a warm, well-lit fortress, with nothing to worry about but a mad, ancient wizard.

"No, sir. I might've heard something move, though."

"The animals know." Brand was, admittedly, the first to notice that. The mules were uncomfortable, easily spooked and beginning to get work themselves into the special kind of frenzy reserved for predators.

"Oh. So they do. Brand, get them all hobbled — Mather, help him! I don't care what's out there, we can't lose the mules!" I *did* care what was out there. I caught a reflected glimpse — eyes, maybe. I set my lantern on top of the lead cart as soon as Mather had taken the mule off it, and drew my sword and shield. Mather got that mule hobbled and a second off its cart by the time Brand managed to hobble his mule in the back; damn, but the man was afraid.

Even I could hear the rustling beasts now, moving in the darkness and the cover with an alien grace. The mule Mather was working on was giving him trouble; he could not get the hobbles on. Brand had given up helping, his own state of agitation apparently interfering with his usual ability to calm the creatures; he instead drew steel and eyed the forest with hatred, so tense he shook.

A branch snapped.

Brand swore.

A vicious stroke of lightning painted the forest, for a moment, in shocking shadows.

Something rushed Mather and his panicked mule behind me, a snarling rush of fangs and stench. The mule let out one of the most pitiable sounds I'd ever heard, a terrified half-whinny, half honk, but it was cut short and the animal tumbled to the ground.

Brand erupted into a flurry of motion: he ran into the woods. I could not be-

lieve it. I whirled around to face a rustle of darkness receding into the underbrush, Mather with a sword gleaming wet with blood, and a downed mule with its throat torn out, bleeding in the mud.

Mather said, "They're not—" and then a creature darted out at us. It was huge, shoulders rising up to my waist, head and dark eyes and vicious fangs rising above that. Mercifully, it had four legs.

Thunder rolled across the world, its low rumbling drowning out even the intensifying rain and gusts of wind.

The wolf was quick, strong, and deadly, but it was also wounded and enraged. It went for Mather, who braced himself in a strong stance and caught its charge on his shield. The wolf clawed at the thin plate of metal, snapping jaws trying to edge around, but Mather staggered back under the load, shifting so as to keep his throat away from the hungry maw. I swung, hard, at the beast's neck, hoping to snap its spine – another wolf took advantage of my distraction to get a death-grip on my right boot, and it started shaking vigorously. My blade scored a deep cut in the side of the wolf Mather was fending off, and it joined a similar cut in marring the thick fur of the creature's side. Maybe I cracked a rib. Regardless, Mather would be on his own for a little; I staggered and fell under the harsh ministrations of the attacking wolf. My sword splashed to the ground as I threw my arm under myself to catch the crash of my fall. The wolf leapt atop me, and I firmly believe that only my reflexive blow to its head, struck with my shield, kept me united with my throat.

I hit it again, causing it to withdraw for a moment; in that moment, I thrust the shield between us. The beast came at me with renewed vigor as I worked my officer's dagger free of its sheath with my right hand, and just as it finally forced my shield-arm to my chest, bringing my face firmly in range of its slavering jaws, I put the silver-plated officer's dagger through its ear. Though the point of the blade stuck, the immediate purpose seemed accomplished.

A web of lunatic light suddenly rose up from the wolf, scattered, and drifted away in a gust of wind like so many luminous dandelion seeds. I didn't dwell on the display, though the hair on the back of my neck reacted furiously; the wet wolf corpse was surprisingly heavy, and I didn't have the right leverage to get it off of me, which didn't stop me from trying. My pack, which I should have shrugged off when taking up arms, was complicating matters.

I could hear Mather splashing around and grunting, and the growls of his wolf persisted, so I redoubled my efforts, gripping the embedded dagger and using to wrench the weighty corpse off my chest. The knife came free in the process, leav-

ing me at once both armed and free of my burden. It was very rewarding, and I took to my feet with a renewed sense of my own potency, even with the added difficulty of rising with my pack on. That feeling lasted all of three seconds — I started toward Mather, who had been forced to the ground as well, and was still trying to employ his sword against the attacking wolf, with little success.

“The angle’s wrong, get a knife!” I managed to get the whole sentence out before another wolf tackled me, teeth digging into the interlocking links of chain protecting my right arm at the shoulder. Military theorists could say what they liked about marching in mail, but it was a good idea. The movement kept the rust off, and wolves had a tougher time ripping one to shreds. Full armor was better, with its interlocking lamellar plates, but even Sergeant Brand wouldn’t have wanted to march in it all the time. I staggered under the sudden impact, but managed to keep to my feet this time around.

My helmet had fallen off when I went down under the first wolf, and for some reason for a sudden shining moment the only thing I could feel was the sensation of cool, clean water trickling down my scalp and neck as the rain came down. The wolf chewing on my arm was secondary to that little kiss of nature, and I raised my face for a moment to the lightning-illuminated heavens and let the feeling wash through my exhausted limbs, my aching back. Even the looming menace of whatever dark force had ensorcelled the beasts seemed more distant. The wolf addressing itself to my arm became more insistent, and so I smashed it off my shoulder with a sharp blow from my shield and then nicked it with my dagger — and damn if those same little flecks of silver luminescence didn’t fall away like broken chainwork. The wolf ran off into the night. The black hand sorcery was more or less confirmed, but I was strangely calm at the prospect. A peal of thunder reported the flash that had illuminated the sky moments before.

Mather had finally come to his senses, and was no longer slapping the flank of his opponent ineffectually with his sword. He had taken to hammering the wolf in the temple with his pommel, and had made rather a mess of the wolf’s head, but it was, incredibly, still fighting. Nurturing my suspicion, I gave the wolf a solid stab in the flank with my silvered dagger, and was instantly rewarded by the same disintegrating mesh of silver light. The wolf briefly considered remaining alive, decided against it, and died atop Mather.

There were other wolves about, and apparently they’d had enough. A rallying howl rang out to the west, and the animals ran off, vanishing as quickly as they had appeared. Cleared of their racket, I could hear another struggle a few yards into the

woods.

“Mather, see if any of the animals survived.” The beasts of burden had all fallen, but considering the predators, panic, hobbles and storm, that was not surprising. One or, if we were impossibly lucky, even both might still be alive and well. “I’m going to find Brand.”

By the time I reached the site of all the commotion, the wolves that had attacked Brand were dead. He sat, dazed, in the middle of a small clearing, his helmet sprawled a few feet in front of him. He looked up as I came into the clearing, and then looked away. I had never seen a man so thoroughly radiate shame. His breathing still heavy from the work of killing two wolves, he sat in the downpour with the aspect of a man condemned. His sword was nowhere to be seen, and gore was scattered around him — he had dispatched at least one of the wolves by opening up their innards with his long and wicked knife. His nose bled, and his hair was slick with blood. His left ear was a total wreck.

I crouched next to him. “Brand, it’s alright. Don’t even say it. We’ll talk about it later.” His eyes remained far-off. I had suspected guilt; I now also suspected a concussion.

“I ran into a tree, sir. Brought me to my senses. Wolves sir. Wolves, not spiders. I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I don’t know how I got so stupid.” I helped him to his feet, handed him his helmet.

“I can straighten your nose, Sergeant, but you have to find your own damn sword.” I slapped him on the back. “We need to get a look at that ear, so hurry up.” He plunged into the undergrowth just past the tree that had hit him in the face, and came up presently, lost sword in hand. We returned to the carts, where Mather had determined that while one of the animals had survived, and had even dispatched a wolf with its desperate kicking, the other had broken a leg. Mather had already put his knife to work on the suffering beast. Brand’s lucidity became more and more pronounced, and he was soon prioritizing supplies and preparing a hidden lean-to in which to shelter those that we would have to leave behind. He wouldn’t let me near his ear until he was done. It wasn’t a total loss, and with some needlework, bandages, ointments and luck, he ended up keeping it. His nose had been broken before, and went back into place with an eye-watering pop. Brand grinned about it, when it was all done and said he deserved all that and more — the man was insane.

#

Loring was not well suited to the quiet life, and less well suited to a life of

honest labor. His commanders had, traditionally, perceived that in him, and kept him on the move, on patrol or in battle. The Lieutenant had seen fit to leave him to watch Sloan's back, and he took that seriously, but Sloan didn't do much that really needed watching, and most of the time he sat with Reiftyr, who looked like a corpse having its final convulsions most of the time. Besides which, Sloan didn't seem to want Loring anywhere near Reiftyr's room, which suited Loring just fine. The locals made Loring uncomfortable. Between their skittishness and the one old codger who liked to watch him from half way across the damn farm, he managed to get the idea that they did not want him there.

Loring quickly burned through his list of things to do that would not get him in trouble. During one of Reiftyr's lucid spans, Loring gave him the dagger that had slid so easily through his armor. Loring had spent hours cleaning, sharpening and polishing the decorative, bejeweled thing, and thought it a fine trophy. Reiftyr appreciated it, but as Loring saw it, the kid probably wouldn't survive long enough to make it a real loss to Loring anyhow. If he did, well, he'd have earned the damn thing. Besides, there had been two of the ornamental weapons, and Loring had laid hands on both of them. They appeared to be a matched set, one with a large black stone set in the pommel, the other with a similar white stone. Reiftyr went and got himself stuck with the white one; Loring preferred the black one anyway.

After he got the blades cleaned up, he'd switched out the legion knife on his belt for the decorated but sturdy dagger. He figured he'd sell the legion-issue weapon in the next market he passed through. Between working in the fields under Geith and surreptitiously prowling the surrounding grounds at night, it took him about a week to put a proper mirror polish back on the blades, which had apparently been neglected during their tenure as implements of brigandry. It wore on his mind, during that week, that the closest market was but a day's travel away, in the village of Curic, the baronial seat. Of course, it would be a longer trip if one didn't want to swim the Winterwash - but Loring had grown up swimming rivers other men wouldn't dare.

After Loring gave Reiftyr the dagger, Sloan pulled him aside and said, "Reiftyr's not doing well. It's no fever I know of, and it's killing him."

"You think we should maybe get him a real doctor? No offense, Slo, but—"

"No, you're right. I'm not even a proper medic. The baron will have a physician. Possibly from Tellon Immural." They both considered the implications of that for a moment. The Lieutenant had clearly wanted to avoid contact with Baron Neor — and everyone else in the region — until the guardtower was properly se-

cured, but had left no orders on the subject. Any doctor trained in Tellon Immural would at least be able to identify Reiftyr's malady, but chances were good he would also be a political agent of some kind, and not necessarily just the Baron's.

"We don't have to make this a Legion thing, Slo. We're just travelers, right? I go and ask for the doctor, we trade enough salt or whatever to pay for it, and if he's from Tellon, we just hide all the getup. We can borrow clothes from the field hands."

"Oh right, that'll go over well. They way they've been acting, you'll have to chase one down first, and it won't be an easy chase. These country boys can run." Loring flashed a wicked smile.

"Well now, if we're going about it that way, it shouldn't be a problem..."

"You're impossible. I'll ask Melony when she comes around later." Loring's grin took on a lecherous aspect, but before he could say anything, Sloan rebuked, "With the hot water. For Reifter. You animal."

"Well. When you get done with the hot water, and whatever else it is that you're doing that she has to come out here every night, ask her about it."

"Listen here, Loring, you wretch. If it weren't for Melony, Reiftyr'd be dead by now, and that's a fact. We don't have time for anything else, even if I'm not saying I wouldn't like it if we did. We can't afford any complications, anyhow. I'll get you the clothes, alright?" Sloan looked Loring steadily in the eye until Loring looked away.

"Alright. Fine. No need to read me the Acts. I'll go to Curic in the morning. Anything else you need?"

"Luck, the favor of Light, other sundries. I'll make a list."

"Yeah, right. I don't think we've got enough salt to bribe highest Illumi. A priest, sure, but..." Sloan cut him off.

"It might do to get in touch with a priest while you're out there, the way Reiftyr's doing." Loring left abruptly, a sudden craving for drink rumbling in his gut.

#

Discomfort took root the moment Loring set foot in Curic's market square, but it took him a few minutes of browsing stalls and getting a feel for the place to figure that his discomfort was not solely due to his too-large borrowed tunic. It wasn't the same bizarre hostility he had faced in Whorl; people were happy enough to talk and do sundry business with him, though he guards at the gate to the baron's walled estate couldn't seem to keep their eyes off of him.

Come to think of it, no one could. A small group of townies had gathered off

to one corner of the square, and occasionally someone pointed at him. Loring knew danger signs when he saw them, and decided to get directly to the doctor business after he had a jug of cider in hand, discarding the rest of his list. He found someone willing to trade a sealed jug of cider for a fairly small weight of salt, but convinced him to take his legion knife instead. The trader didn't argue. He was sad to let the price on the fine knife fall so low, but his uneasiness was only increasing. The group that had been discussing him had scattered, but something still felt wrong.

He inquired about a doctor, and discovered that Baron Neaor did indeed keep a physician, and he would indeed go out to the Whorl farmstead for a half-pound of salt. Loring made the arrangements with a gentleman everyone agreed was the man's appointment-maker. He felt the price was high, but then, it wasn't his wealth, so he didn't much care. The absurdity of the Legion order to avoid carrying coin and precious bullion out past Imperial borders was ever evident; prices in barter goods were never as solid as one might prefer. As night settled, he sought and found a room for the night behind a local taverna. He settled in, but his feeling of unease settled in with him, and took root in his mind, inhibiting sleep. He could not even enjoy his cider, and he recorked the jug having barely touched the stuff.

That night, the reeves came for him. The taverna's owner let them into his little shed with the key; had Loring not moved the bed to block the door and slept on the blankets in the far corner, they would have caught him unaware.

As it was, Loring was startled awake by the sudden crash of the boarding shed's door against the bed, which he had dragged in front of the door as in improvised security measure; having grown to manhood among the hunted criminals along the Fieldcrest highways, he had learned to wake quickly and with a weapon to hand. Crouching in his smallclothes against the wall his shack shared with the taverna kitchen, he glanced from his glittering, bejeweled knife to his folded field hand's clothing, his still untapped jug of cider and his well-broken boots. The only reason the reeves weren't in his room yet was their surprise at the door being blocked at all; he had only moments. Quickly, he scooped up the boots in one hand, sheathed his dagger and dropped it in one of the boots, and took up the jug in his other hand. The door staggered under the weight of a man trying to shoulder it in, and the bed slid over a foot; Loring threw a powerful kick at the thin planking of the shared wall with the taverna, which splintered and fell under the blow. He ducked into the kitchen, receiving scrapes and splinters as tolls for passage through the gap left by the broken plank. Cursing quietly, he moved on bare feet through

the small dining room, even as the Baron's men shoved their way into the shack behind him. He began to consider the possibility of fighting, but if the Baron had indeed sent his reeves, things would likely end poorly, no matter the outcome of the fight itself. Briefly, as his searching hands found the poorly hidden key to the front door under a crooked flowerpot, Loring considered the possibility that it wasn't reeves at all, but bandits or just some kind of mysteriously irate mob of locals. It didn't matter.

He dashed through the door and out into the cool night air. The intruders, apparently larger and more burdened with armor and weapons than the small, lithe legionnaire, had elected to come around the building rather than chase their quarry through the wall, and were rounding the corner as Loring cleared the railing of the patio and started across the market square, his feet slapping the flagstone. He had stolen a glance at his pursuers, illuminated by the low summer moon — reeves, in the livery of the baron. Loring pressed on, into the darkened forest.

#

Reiftyr had settled into a deep, death-like sleep, and Sloan grew increasingly certain that he would pass before the Baron's physician, if any, could arrive. He was determined to give Reiftyr every extra minute he could. Melony, bless her, had seen his predicament, and offered to take over a while after Loring had set out for Curic.

Sloan had put up his best arguments against it, but shortly found that it was no use and surrendered to the inevitable. She promised to keep Reiftyr comfortable and cool, but only if Sloan promised to eat a proper meal and go straight to sleep. By the time Sloan was blinking himself awake in the cool night air, he had decided that even if Reiftyr hadn't had the benefit of his constant vigil, the benefits to his own health had to have been worth it. He oiled his weapons and armor, then Reiftyr's, and headed back to the longhouse. Melony came out and met him about half way.

"You're not much of a doctor, you know," She intoned by way of greeting. "He just needed some singing-to." Reiftyr leaned out the open window of the longhouse, his lopsided grin and mischievous eyes overshadowing his still pale complexion. Upon seeing Reiftyr back from the brink of death, Loring seized Melony under the arms and spun her in wide circles in a fit of enthusiasm. He remembered, too late, that he was supposed to be a stoic soldier. Also, that he had sworn off any such foolishness. At least no one was around to see, it being the middle of the night.

"Put me down, you brute!" The gale of laughter accompanying the admoni-

tion somewhat softened its tone. He was already beginning to comply when she managed to get a leg down out of the air long enough to push off the ground; he tumbled under the sudden imbalance, and the two went sprawling into the grass. She rolled away and was back on her feet in an eyeblink; she ran off, laughing, leaving Sloan to work his way back to his feet and glare at Reifyr's obvious amusement.

"At least it wasn't a girl what took me down, brother." Reifyr's ice-chip eyes gleamed with joviality, and he looked like his brush with death may well be behind him for good.

"You're not serious," Sloan grouched. "Women are more dangerous than brigands."

#

Loring's pace didn't slow until he was well out past even the outlying cottages of Curic. In the forest, he gained some distance on his pursuers, and even felt safe enough to take the necessary minute to put on his boots and lash the dagger's sheath in place in the style of a boot knife. The reeves weren't giving up; when the first howl of a hunting hound went up, Loring concluded that he was going to have to hurt them.

A cold smile crept across his face. He continued to put distance between himself and Curic, but he moved at a slightly slower pace now, watching for the right place to turn against his pursuers. The baying of the hunting hound grew closer; at least, he reflected, there was only one.

When the sounds of pursuit drew near enough, he finally settled for a thick old tree overhanging the creek he had been following, and occasionally crossing, in an attempt to loose the hound. He carefully hid his cider among the rambling, knurled roots. He found a smooth river stone, roughly the size of a man's head, and hefted it up, carrying it in the crook of one arm. Climbing until he rested on a solid branch more than a man's reach off the ground, he lay flat along the limb, pressing his naked chest against the still warm wood. He eased the dagger out of its sheath, then quietly pressed its tip into the far side of the tree limb so his pursuers would not catch its deadly, decadent gleam. He swung the stone down, holding it in both hands, arms dangling from the treebranch. The sounds of pursuit came closer. Loring took deep, even breaths, resting against the smooth, weathered wood of the tree. The heavy stone fatigued his fingers, strained his shoulders. His sun-darkened skin blended with shadow and wood in the weak and filtered light of a half-moon.

The dog came splashing across the stream, nose to the ground, picking up

the trail almost immediately on the other side. It came directly under Loring, nose to the ground, growling. Men came just behind it, splashing into the stream. Loring let slip the rock.

He had aimed for the animal's skull, but may have missed; he was too busy yanking the dagger free from its ready post in the tree limb to see. The sharp crack of bone accompanied the stone's weighty descent. As the hound let loose a series of pained yelps, Loring swung down to hang from the limb, his left arm and legs still twined around the girth of the tree, his upper body and right arm swinging down to strike. He slammed the pommel of the dagger into the leading reeve's helmet, eschewing the ready option of stabbing the man in the throat — Sloan wouldn't want him to make things worse than they had to be. The blow was enough to knock the man off his feet on the moss-slick footing of the creek; he tumbled with a splash, and his thrashing about knocked the man behind him off-balance.

Loring let go with his legs, swinging his booted feet down and around, letting fully go of the tree limb just past the lowest point of the swing — the move hurled him feet-first into the staggering second man, who collapsed predictably into the stream under the heavy blow. As for Loring, he too tumbled into the shallow creek, the water taking some, but not all of impact out of the fall. He felt sharp river rocks cut into his unprotected forearms and buttocks, leaving shallow, ragged scrapes. More rounded rocks left a savage pattern of bruises to compliment the cuts. He bit down, did not cry out. Recovering quickly, he stabbed the two men thrashing around in the stream each once in the back of the knee with deep, deliberate strokes. Neither was in any shape to resist. Clouds of pinkish, diluted blood rolled away with the flow of the water. He rolled out of the creek, found the dog whimpering and thrashing around, back half paralyzed.

"Serves you right, cur." He muttered his parting sentiments as he retrieved his jug of cider, and set off into the night moments ahead of the remaining pursuers' arrival on the chaotic scene. They did not follow.

#

Sloan was relaxed into the rocking chair Melony had brought, his feet up on the end of Reiftyr's bed. The burgeoning light of predawn outdid a flickering candle by the bedside, lighting his smiling face as he let out a long, contented sigh. His rescuer was fighting the upward curl of the corners of her lips; the soldier had made such a fuss about the chair when she'd brought it in the night before that one might've thought it a consideration on par with that due the emperor. She had

called it a peace offering.

"See," she said, "isn't that better than a stool?" Sloan nodded his agreement. His pretense of tough immunity to desire for creature comforts was completely abolished.

"Still, won't someone miss it? I'd hate to impose."

"Don't be silly. You're working today. Even you will have forgotten the chair by noon." Sloan began to protest; Reiftyr was, after all, his first responsibility.

"I don't know that I'll be able; Reiftyr—" the invalid in question interrupted.

"I'll be fine, and you know it." It was true. Since the fever had broken the night before, even the recently ghastly wound seemed to be conquering the last vestiges of infection. Sloan considered Reiftyr's improvement nothing short of miraculous, though it did seem that his days of sitting in the shade tending his comrade were coming to an end. He must have let his disappointment show; Melony favored him with a brief smile as she left, looking over her shoulder to say,

"Oh, and father says we should have you all for dinner, tonight." Sloan's jaw dropped, and she was gone before he managed to collect himself. Reiftyr was as amused as Sloan had ever seen him. He'd been almost perpetually smirking since he'd stopped hallucinating and shaking.

"I don't think she meant they're gonna' eat us, Sloan. Girl's too pretty to be a cannibal. You don't have ta' look like that."

Sloan let out a solitary syllable of chuckle. "She just invited Loring to dinner with her parents." The mirth on Reiftyr's face faded.

"Oh." He frowned. "Shit."

"Yeah. Don't worry about it, though; he's not due back until dinnertime anyway. He'll just be excused on account of exhaustion."

"That doc'll be a waste, now. I expect you'll still have ta' pay 'im."

"I've had worse problems."

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Loring considered trying to find a stream or something to clean up a bit before returning to Whorl. The combination of the steady walk-run-walk pace he'd maintained on his zig-zagging path back to the farmhold had been just the right thing to set off the nausea the jug of cider had eventually given him. He suspected that the cider hadn't been quite right; his stomach had agreed and had parted company with the stuff only recently. He decided on speed over couth, and skipped the clean-up. He wished he'd thrown up on himself on the other side of the river instead; The smell of vomit was one of his least favorite odors in the world.

Drunk was giving way to hung-over when he finally did reach Whorl. He was confident he hadn't been followed. His father had taught him that it was critical to be able to practice wilderness skills even when drunk, and Loring had taken the lesson to heart. The reeves couldn't have followed his trail without a skilled tracker and a dog, and he was fairly sure they were fresh out of both.

It had struck him, however, that the reeves would know where he was going, as he had made an appointment with the sawbones. Sloan would have to be told, and they would all have to go into hiding. Reiftyr wouldn't be treated. In the back of his mind, Loring searched around for a way to feel guilty about it, but he could see no reason whatever for the reeves to have come after him like that, and given what they had done, he was certain he had acted correctly. There was only one thing for it.

By dint of good fortune, Sloan was out in the fields unaccompanied, repairing a scarecrow while the other hands ate breakfast back at the houses when Loring came sprinting, in underwear and boots, out of the forest. His back was battered, and there was dried blood to complement the bruises. Sloan's fury followed his incredulity instantly into the back of his mind when Loring shouted,

"Reeves are coming for us, Sloan! I swear I don't know why!" After a brief shouting match and consultation, the two soldiers went to Reiftyr's room and slammed the door so they could further discuss the situation. They quickly determined that Reiftyr was in no shape to back the other men in a fight, and even though Loring insisted he hadn't killed anyone yet, Sloan suspected that a fight was unavoidable if they stayed in Whorl. Reiftyr was well enough to travel, and Loring couldn't be happier to move along.

Sloan said, "It looks like we won't be paying for that physician, after all."

"No kidding. Look, no one here knows we're in for it. I say we slip out now, so they don't know where we're going or when we left, neither." Loring buckled his sword belt on over his freshly laundered tabard as he spoke. That he had donned his lamellar jack after settling into his chain did not escape notice. He began fastening the buckles on a reinforced arm piece as he continued, "And what they don't know, they can't tell Neaor's thugs. It might be rough around here for a while if the Baron blames them, but we've got a mission, and we've got our skins, and we've got to be loyal to both." Sloan looked lost. Reiftyr was nodding thoughtfully.

In the hallway, Melony's hands twisted at one another in agitation. Quietly, she fled the longhouse.

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