

*Steel, Blood & Fire*

©2012, Allan Batchelder

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or retransmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from its author, Allan Batchelder.

I would like to thank my first-round readers, whose support encouraged me to believe...

Gillian Avery  
A. Bento  
Benoit Deeg  
Bobbi & Rusty Dreier  
Rodney Sherwood

And also my wife & son, who endured my sustained absences from the living room when we might have been doing something together.

## ~ ONE ~

### Vykers, In the Stocks

The beatings and abuse continued without pause, without end, due in no small part to the efforts of the two A'Shea on either side of him, who had surely foresworn their sacred trust in prolonging his misery. He had hoped for – even expected – death, by the end of his first day. But the Duke, the people of the Reaches and his healers would not be satisfied until the last victim had exacted his just measure of vengeance. An all-too familiar speech interrupted his reverie.

“You may strike him once,” one of the guards told the next in line, “however you like. If your blow’s the one kills him, though, you’ll be whipped on this same post. Do you understand?”

“Aye.”

Of course. They all understood; they were artists of understanding by now. And so he’d been punched, slapped, scratched, kicked, stabbed with needles in non-vital areas, spat upon, burned and had various things thrown on him, from rotten blood, to urine, feces, vomit and offal. He was a masterpiece of the people’s understanding. And still, death would not come, nor the lines of peasants abate. He could endure the physical torture – what choice did he have? – but the constant insults and taunting were harder to ignore. He’d been a proud man. Once. Worse than the beatings and the verbal abuse, however, were the flies. There must, he concluded, have been one for each person he’d killed over the years. Perhaps these flies were even the shades of those unhappy dead, come back to join in the festivities. They made him itch something fierce. The only accidental mercy he enjoyed was that he’d been hung up facing west, and for the brief few minutes that sunset was in his eyes, he could see nothing.

But perhaps blindness had put him here in the first place.

\*\*\*\*\*

One morning, he was awakened – shocking enough that he’d been asleep – with a crash of salt water, the cold of it practically stopping his heart, and the salt burning his countless wounds like hellfire. Miraculously, he found himself alone. Or nearly so.

“You look like shit, Vykers. Smell like it, too.” It was Captain Brandt again, backed by a number of silent soldiers. “Course, most of it probably *is* shit, but you get my meaning.”

The best the Reaper could manage was to grunt in reply.

“I guess we all thought you’d be dead by now.”

Vykers was silent this time. No need to respond to such an obvious truth.

“There’s no good news, there, though. His Lordship says you’re to live...after a fashion.”

Brandt was setting him up. Vykers wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“We’re taking your feet and hands, Reaper, and then we’re dumping you in the woods.”

Vykers looked up, inquiringly.

Brandt shrugged. “His Lordship thinks there may come a day when someone will have need of your...talents. If you’re still alive, that is.”

Finally, Vykers spoke. “That’s bad strategy.”

“No shit. And I told him so. But he’s convinced you’ll be tractable.” The captain reached over and unlocked the mechanism holding Vykers in place.

Slowly, the prisoner stood up.

“Enjoy it, Vykers. You won’t be so tall in a few moments’ time.”

The odd sensation in his gut was fear, he realized. The first he'd felt in ages. He simply couldn't – or didn't want to – imagine life without hands or feet. His Lordship had finally accomplished what thousands of angry peasants could not: he had made Vykers feel something.

\*\*\*\*\*

The actual taking of his hands and feet was more psychologically painful than physically so. The terror as the axe swooped down and parted his flesh was unlike anything he'd ever known. The pain was less significant, for a while. This time, the healers took no special care to sustain him, beyond cauterizing and wrapping his wounds. Watching them gather his hands and feet into a bucket and carry them off, Vykers felt unspeakable loss.

He spent the entire journey into the wilds in a semi-conscious fog, in the back of an old wagon that must once have been used to transport pickled herring. The smell and the rough jostling made him violently ill and, along with the weakness, fever and pain he was already feeling, he again found himself wishing, yearning, for death. This was immeasurably harder to endure than those days of beatings and insults in the public square. He almost laughed at the thought of it. Almost.

He must have lost consciousness, because the next thing he knew, he was crashing to the ground in a dark forest. The shadow of a fat man stood between him and the last of the day's light.

"See you in hell, Vykers."

"Oh, you'll be there, too?"

A moment of angry silence, and then Vykers felt a boot to his face. He might've lost a tooth. Another one. There was a bit of rustling, and then he felt hot liquid pouring onto his head.

Piss.

The fat man laughed.

Vykers shut him out and went back to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Aoife, On Her Mission

She had, she felt, spent most of her life second-guessing herself. Standing out of the rain under an old cedar by the side of the road, her mind circled back, inevitably, to the same conclusion: she should have killed him when she had the chance. And the same old retort tried to rescue her: how can a ten year old girl be expected to murder her little brother?

There was no way to answer these thoughts; she had tried for years. She was damned when he *became*.

She gasped. Sometimes, when she was wrapped up in these thoughts, she forgot to breathe. Or was that self-sabotage? Anyway, she sighed, shouldered her pack and set off again, hoping to make the next village by nightfall. A fire would be heavenly. And something to eat, something hot. She wouldn't be picky.

Of course, she felt guilt as she noticed the telltale scars of war on the landscape. But it had been a while. Maybe things were on the mend locally, and folks had begun to forget. Until he returned.

Gods, it was driving her mad. She needed to visit an herbalist. More than fire or food, she hoped the nearest settlement had an herbalist, even a hedge witch would do. She had to quell these nagging recriminations or she would lose her mind.

“Blessings, Sister. Walk with you?”

She turned. A withered old man in tattered clothing hobbled towards her.

“Best to have comp’ny along these roads, nowaday.”

“Certainly, friend, certainly, and welcome.”

Welcome, indeed. Anything, anyone to wrench her mind from its present self-abuse.

“Spreading the word, then, are you?” the old man asked.

“That’s been done, I think.” She responded. “I’m more for ministering to the sick.”

He laughed. “Plenty of work for you in town, then. No shortage.”

“And you? What brings you onto the road at this hour?”

“Was told there was a Mender approaching, and I came out searching, to be your escort-like.”

“But wouldn’t they send the –“

“I **am** the Captain of the Guard.”

That stopped her in her tracks.

The old man shrugged, apologetically. “Times ain’t what they ought to be.”

Everything, everything made her feel guilty.

“What’s the population of your town, sir? Captain?”

“Thousand, give or take.”

“And how many men amongst you?”

“Of shaving and sword-bearing age? Maybe sixty.”

She reeled. “But sixty?”

“Oh, there be a couple hundred boys, surely. But we’re letting ‘em *be* boys, for the nonce. All the rest –“

“Yes, I know, Captain,” she said, a little more sharply than she’d intended, “the wars have been evil, inexcusably, unforgivably evil.”

“That they have” was all he said before falling silent.

Up ahead, she saw the silhouettes of cottages in the gloom.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Vykers, In the Forest

Vykers woke up with dirt in his eyes. It took him a moment, but he dimly remembered crawling into an old log at some point. He was more thirsty than he’d ever been in his life, even more than in his various campaigns across numerous deserts, even more than during his recent days-long torture in the square of that nameless village. Thirst was a demon inside him. He felt that if he didn’t get water in the next few minutes, he’d be dead within the hour.

He tried to move and was blindsided by an avalanche of pain. That’s right: they’d destroyed him, taken his hands and feet. The stumps were itching and burning and throbbing all at once. It was by sheer force of will that he clung to consciousness and sanity. Water, first. Nothing else mattered.

Slowly, he inched his way out of the log and into the light of afternoon. In the Forest. Questions were a swarm of bees in his head, but water first. Water first. What did he know about water? It flowed downhill. It was most likely to be found in the low places, in the gullies and ravines. He listened, but could hear only insects and birds. They knew where the water was, but wouldn’t tell him, the little bastards. He raised his head and looked around. This was an old, old forest in a temperate climate. There were oaks and firs, alder and birch. The undergrowth was all but impassible. There would be water.

He had a powerful urge to sleep, but felt that if did, he would never wake up. Water first.

There was no obvious slope nearby, but he began crawling in the direction that most felt downhill. After an eternity of unrelenting effort and agony, he found himself looking down into the urine-filled tracks of a hooved animal. He sniffed the liquid and almost threw up. But he bent his lips to the tracks and drank, anyway, and indeed had a very hard time keeping it down. His

disgust and anger gave him a burst of energy, though. He considered a moment: was this beast coming from or heading towards water? Coming from, he decided and wriggled off in the direction from which it came. He almost burst into tears when, after a great deal of time, he came within sight of a bog.

With frantic energy, he shuffled into the water, almost completely submerging himself. It was not particularly cold and had a deep, woody flavor, but he didn't care. It was the most wonderful thing he had ever tasted. When he was satisfied, he crawled back onto dry land, exhausted. Again, he needed a safe place to sleep. He was ravenous, he was cold, but of all his basic needs, sleep was most demanding. Eventually, he found a dense thicket that backed up against a large boulder. He would be unreachable from behind and difficult to reach from the front. It was not perfect – nowhere near – but good enough.

He slept like a dead man.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Long Pete & Company, In Corners

Long Pete was a gigolo. He had been a lousy farmer, an inept fisherman, a hopeless blacksmith's apprentice and a middling soldier. In the dearth of men after the wars, he became very popular with the local womenfolk. Well, perhaps "very popular" was overdoing it. He became *necessary*, and that was good enough for him. That he could pleasure himself and a woman and make money at the same time was more than he had ever hoped for. Still, he couldn't escape the feeling that he ought to be doing something, when he wasn't doing *someone*. And the other men in town weren't exactly fond of him. What he wanted – what he needed – was a higher calling, some way to earn their respect and eternal gratitude. There had once been a statue in the town square, some honorable so-and-so, but the locals had been forced to smelt it down for swords, armor and arrowheads during the war. But they couldn't do that to the statue Long Pete hoped to have someday, if it were made of marble.

"Ho there, Pete!" Long Pete was shaken from his daydream by the voice of his too-constant companion, Janks. At his side was their friend, Short Pete, wheeling himself along in his specially made cart. Short Pete, whose real name was "Frayne," had lost both legs in battle, but not his sense of humor. If Long Pete was somewhat vain, the existence of a Short Pete would surely temper him.

"Shall we make merry this morning?" Janks bellowed.

"I'm a bit the worse for wear after last night's...celebrations, and I've work to do later."

"Work, is it? Work! I should be so lucky!" Short Pete replied. The fact was that, while Long Pete was tall and somewhat chicken-like, and Janks resembled nothing so much as a pig, Short Pete would have been a fine specimen, indeed, if not for the lack of legs.

"Lucky? I'd trade it all in a heartbeat for a title and a piece of land. Some of these women are impossibly demanding. The great Mahnus himself couldn't please them."

“Well, they do say he had two peckers.” Janks offered.

“I’d rather have kept that image out of my head all day” said Short Pete. “But you couldn’t work a bit of land to save yourself.”

“I didn’t say anything about working it. I just want a buffer to keep the riffraff out.”

“But you *are* the riffraff!” Short Pete objected.

Long Pete choked. “With friends like you...”

“Got anything to drink about you?” Janks asked.

Long Pete sighed and pulled a flask from his vest. “Go easy on that, Janks. I won’t be able to refill it ‘til I see the widow Sorensen tomorrow night. Anyway, why don’t you go over to the inn and drink your fill there?”

“I...” Janks began.

“He’s got no credit left. Owes Arnet too much money.” Short Pete said.

“It’s true, it’s true, and a terrible thing it is when honest men can’t earn a decent wage.” Janks lamented.

“Honest men?” Long Pete sneered. “Where? And why should the indecent earn a decent wage?”

“A man’s gotta do something for money, hasn’t he? Look at you!”

“I happen to perform a valuable service!”

“For yourself, maybe. I doubt all them widows’d miss you if you went off to war again.”

Long Pete was indignant. “For your information, mate...”

“Ladies! Ladies!” Short Pete interjected, “This is boredom talking. What we need is some sort of cause, or purpose. We can’t sit here drinking and whoring forever.”

“They’re not whores!”

“You know what I mean, Long. We don’t have any goals. You want that title and piece of land, you’ll have to earn it.”

There was a long silence and then Janks said “I might have an idea...”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Vykers, In the Forest

When he had been whole, he had not been given to reflection; he took, he broke, he killed. Now, though, he had little to do but reflect. And he did not enjoy it. Memories of things he did – or even might have done – bedeviled him. Questions of why and what-for tormented him. Had he been given life only to take others' lives? What was his purpose now? Why was he even alive? *Countless Hells*, he hated these thoughts; they were the province of weak-spirited philosophers. If he had his way, he'd...but he did not have his way and likely never would again. He'd been reduced, he felt, to his primal state, that of a beast. He lived in squalor, ate whatever came within reach, slept, pissed. He'd long since lost his use for language – who was there to talk to? Ha! Was this so different from his former life, after all? Except for the thinking.

Without cause or warning, he remembered a particular battle a few years earlier. His army had swept into some backwater and pitched camp. Facing annihilation, the locals sent their beloved champion to challenge Vykers in single combat. The man was a legend among his people, with a near-mythical sword. He was tall, he was handsome, with the kind of charisma most only dream about. With a great, jubilant roar, they sent him forward. Vykers cut him down before he could even draw that sword from its sheath, and then broke it over his knee. The silence that followed was deafening. The hope and courage went out of the opposing army in a single breath, and they went to their deaths with little resistance. It was as if, in killing their hero, he had killed an entire people. The rest was just clean-up.

Vykers had never meant that much to anyone. He was universally feared, to be sure, but no one admired him. And no one missed him now, he was certain. But he would not wallow in self-pity. That, too, was for lesser men. He – Something...something was scrabbling in the back of his mind, like a rat in the walls. For a moment, he considered resisting. Then he realized the only way to catch this rat was to let it into the room.

“Warrior...”

Vykers was on all-fours, foraging in a gully. He paused.

“A moment of your time...”

He raised his head, held his breath, looked around. No one. This was something internal.

“Warrior.”

He laughed. He was going mad. He'd figured it might happen, sooner or later.

“I am here.”

Vykers looked around and noticed a pale root or stick under his left knee. Moving off it, he saw several more nearby. Not sticks. Bones. And there, between two stones, a skull. He scuttled towards it, laughed again. “Vykers, old man, you have well and truly gone ‘round the bend!”

“Not so,” the voice replied.

He dug the skull out with his wrists. The back was missing.

“I met my end here, yes.”

Vykers sat back on his haunches, contemplating the skull.

“Will you not speak to me?”

“Why are *you* talking to *me*?”

“Because you’re here. And I’ve been waiting too long for someone, anyone, to come by.”

“And then...?”

“Take me away.”

“You’re out of luck,” Vykers said. “I’ve got no hands and no use for your bones, if I did.”

“But **I** may be of use to you.”

This time, Vykers laughed himself faint. “Who are you?” he asked. “Who *were* you?”

“I was – am -- Fourth Shaper to his Majesty, King Orstoth.”

Vykers sat. “Was. He’s dead, too.”

The voice was silent.

“So, you’re one of them Burners, huh?”

“We prefer ‘Shapers.’”

Vykers laughed. “And I’d *prefer* to have my hands again, but what we want’s got nothing to do with what’s coming to us. What’s your name, Burner?”

“I was called ‘Arune.’”

“Huh. Never heard of you.”

“And your name is Tarmun Vykers.”

“Maybe you *were* a mage.”

“Vykers-the-Vicious,’ they call you, and ‘the Reaper.’”

“I doubt they call me anything, anymore. Far as anyone knows, I’m dead. How’d *you* die, anyway?”

“Long Teeth.”

“Svarren?”

“That’s an older name for them, aye.” Arune said. They’re also variously known as Svarrenii, Worrenu, and Varn. “I’m surprised you haven’t encountered them hereabouts.”

Vykers’ head snapped up; he scanned the forest.

“I told you you weren’t mad. A madman wouldn’t care for his own safety.”

“It’s just that I hate those fucking things. And I’d hate to be set upon when I’m defenseless.”

Now, it was the shade’s turn to laugh. “The Reaper, defenseless? You underestimate yourself.”

“I have no hands or feet, fool. I can’t run from predators nor defend myself once they catch me.”

“Take me with you, then. I can help.”

Vykers glanced at the skull in irritation. “Assuming I haven’t gone completely batshit, and you are more than you seem, how can you help?”

“Take me with you, and I’ll show you.”

“You’re getting on my nerves, Boney. What the hell difference does it make if you lie here or in my cave for all eternity?”

“We won’t be staying in your cave for all eternity, as you put it.”

Vykers brooded.

“I offer you fire,” the ghost said.

Vykers grinned, in spite of himself. “Fire? You can give me fire?”

“What sort of Shaper would I be if I couldn’t conjure fire?”

“Yeah, but you’re dead.”

“For now.”

“Okay,” Vykers shrugged. “Let’s go back to my cave...”

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Aoife, On Her Mission

Aoife followed the old man to an inn, near the town’s well.

“Here y’are, mistress: the town hall, the marketplace, the church and o’ course the inn, all rolled into one.”

“The church? Then your town has a spiritual leader?”

“It does now,” said the old man, looking her up and down.

“But I can’t stay” she protested. “Long.”

Whereupon the old man laughed, “They all say that.”

Turning, he led her inside, where a thick miasma of odors almost knocked her over. Here, she smelled sweat, mold, mildew, candle wax, stale beer, wood smoke, tobacco, animal fur, baking bread and...some sort of stew. Experience told her that her exact position in the room dictated the balance of these odors, and that moving around would produce both better and worse results. The trick was finding the good spots, which was often made more difficult by the other occupants of the room. This particular room was packed, as she suspected was usually the case, given its multifunctional purpose in this community. Thus, her entrance was well and widely marked, and she felt a hundred eyes upon her instantly, some welcoming, some skeptical, a few apathetic and several, quite drunk. She turned to thank the Captain of the Guard, but he had slipped away, unnoticed. Steeling herself, Aoife waded into the crowd and made for a pair of welcoming eyes, which belonged to an old red-headed woman with few teeth but countless wrinkles.

“Good e’en to you, Sister” the old woman chirped.

“Good e’en to you,” Aoife replied. “How does one go about getting the innkeeper’s attention in this...this...throng?”

Laughter. “He knows you’re here, he knows you’re here. He’ll never miss a penny comin’ through that door!”

A large bowl of stew and a tankard of ale clunked down on the table in front of Aoife, as a pair of meaty arms withdrew behind her. Aoife turned, only to see the innkeeper’s broad back as he hustled through the crowd on his way to another table.

“That was fast,” she observed.

More laughter. “Aye. There’s none don’t love Locksby. Best innkeeper in the Lake lands.”

The aroma drifting up from her stew gave Aoife further evidence. “This smells impossibly good. It lacks only a small loaf of...”

Bread plopped down next to her bowl, but before Aoife could thank the man who brought it, he was gone again. “He must be spirit-touched” Aoife said, to yet more laughter. “I’m Aoife, by the way” she said to her table mate.

“Frieda,” the old woman answered, “the town gossip,” she finished, not without pride.

“I must say, Frieda, I’ve only met you and the Captain of the Guard, but you folks seem in surprisingly good spirits.”

“Ah, there’s plenty o’ piss-and-vinegar in Shoult – even some as use piss *as* vinegar, but all-in-all, we’re a good-meaning folk.”

“Then perhaps you’re not in need of my services...?”

“Now, I din’ say that. Kerbie’s legs’ve gone foul – ya c’n smell him two homes away – Nell’s not recovered from birthin’. There’s many a widow needs comfortin’, and then there’s that odd Soolan boy...”

That odd Soolan boy. That odd boy.

Aoife looked into the fire and thought back to another, in the hearth of her parents’ cottage. She remembered a winter storm had been raging outside. She and her parents were huddled close to the flames, while her brother Anders lolled on the floor, babbling to his fingers.

Anders was odd and more than odd. He had been born three weeks late, as if disinterested in joining the rest of humanity. Though his hair was black, his eyes were of blue so pale they seemed almost colorless. It was disconcerting, looking into those eyes. Fortunately, Anders never maintained contact for long. But he didn’t speak well or often, so it was almost impossible to know what he was thinking. As the saying went, “there was no ‘there’ there.” He just didn’t seem to recognize – or even acknowledge – people or events around him. For Anders, Aoife believed, there was no difference between her family and the stones in the hearth; they were not human, they were simply more “things” he encountered. She found that heartbreaking for the first few years of Anders’ life, but eventually came to accept it. No, that was wrong: she became *resigned* to it.

Aoife figured she must have been about nine years old that night, which meant Anders was six. She could still picture her mother, in the glow of the flames, plucking a bird for dinner, while her father sat nearby and smoked his pipe. He favored lowlands tobacco, and whenever she smelted it, it brought back a thousand memories. She loved her father and mother fiercely and wanted to love Anders, but...But.

It was a cozy little cottage – her parents had worked endlessly to make it so – but the wind nevertheless found its way through various cracks and crevices and whistled discordantly at her family like an angry guest, unhappy with his welcome. The rain battered against the roof and walls, as if trying to reduce them to rubble. Yet their little home remained defiant.

There came a banging on the door and not a polite banging, either. Everyone reacted, except Anders. Aoife's parents exchanged looks. Without a word, her father reached up, hefted a piece of firewood from a nearby pile and slowly approached the door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

He looked back, and Aoife's mother stood, clutching her kitchen knife. Her father extended his club and used it to raise the latch. Suddenly, the door exploded inward and a tall, grey-black figure crashed through, stumbling a few steps before collapsing on the floor near the fire.

Aoife remembered the strange, crustacean-like appearance of the thing. He – it – was wearing armor, but it seemed more a part of its skin. No armor she'd ever seen fit so snugly or meshed so seamlessly with the material beneath and between its plates. And the color was so weird – not silvery, nor grey, nor even a proper black...more like an exhausted black, a super-murky grey, a shade heretofore unknown. There was, Aoife noticed, a sword in its belt, but by the look of its scabbard, the sword was as strange as the creature itself. As for the creature, a hairless, waxy yellow head emerged from the armor, with two shiny black orbs for eyes, but without ears or a nose. A sickly grey tongue darted out from its slit of a mouth. The creature shuddered and gasped.

“Kill it, husband!” Aoife's mother urged.

“Kill it? I'm not goin' near the damned thing. Look at it, will you?”

“What is it, father?” Aoife asked.

“Damned if I know,” he answered. “But it don't look healthy, that's certain.”

“We can't have it in our house!” Aoife's mother complained. “You've got to drag it back outside.”

“In this weather? Are you mad, woman?”

“Are **you** mad, husband? We don't even know what it is!”

As her parents argued, Anders crawled over to the thing and moved almost face-to-face with it. Noticing this, Aoife shrieked in fear.

“Great One, preserve us!” her mother cried, while her father stood petrified.

The creature grasped Anders' collar and pulled him near. Aoife's father raised his club and took a tentative step closer. The thing appeared to be struggling to say something when, without

warning, it vomited all over the boy and then went slack. Aoife's father finally rushed in and bashed it on the head, but it was clear it had already died. Her father stood over it, prodding it with his log. The girl and her mother stood nearby, in shock.

"I'm cold," Anders said, the first words he'd spoken in weeks.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Long & Company, Corners

Spirk Nessno was the village idiot or, more accurately, the prototype for a new generation of village idiots. There was nothing obviously wrong with him and, except for the port wine stain that covered the left half of his face, nothing remarkable, either. In fact, Spirk was so bland as to be almost invisible. There were occasions in which he would quite literally go unnoticed in a room of two. But he possessed transcendent gullibility. He was the Grand Master of Credulity and displayed a dizzying virtuosity in that regard. And, as a nothing who'd believe anything, he was paradoxically unique.

"He's our secret weapon!" Janks told his cohorts.

"Against what?" Long Pete asked, skeptically.

"Dunno. But I'm certain whatever-it-might-be's unequipped to deal with the likes of Spirk Nessno."

Long nodded. The legend of Spirk Nessno was not to be gainsaid...

\*\*\*\*\*

When his parents were young, Spirk's mother ran afoul of a local witch, who cursed the poor peasant with infinite fertility, and by the time Spirk was born – twenty-third of thirty-seven children – the wretched Nessno clan had eaten itself out of hovel and home. So it came as no surprise – even to Spirk – when, at the tender age of fifteen, he was given his father's rusty sword and encouraged, rather forcibly, to go and find his fortune in the wide world. Or at least get a damned job. For a simpleton, however, he had a remarkable aversion to simplicity.

"I'm lookin' fer ad...adventure," he announced, as he burst into the infamous Hog's Tooth Tavern one stormy spring night. "Adventure and...uh...a job!" The patrons of the Hog's Tooth were a frightening lot and probably wouldn't have bothered to look up if Alheria herself had come cartwheeling through the door with seventeen demons in her wake, but most were so flabbergasted by the outrageous naïveté of Spirk's declaration that they felt themselves compelled to examine the boy for signs of madness. Spirk, uncomfortable with this sudden scrutiny, could only gasp and roll his eyes, like a fish thrown onto a dock. Shaken from his near catatonia by the waves of derisive laughter that thundered towards him from all corners of the tavern, Spirk turned on his heel and was just about to run weeping into the rain when a voice called "Boy!" Cautiously, he ducked back into the tavern and noticed a man waving at him, while his two companions regarded Spirk with expressions that approached religious wonderment. Occasionally, they whispered amongst themselves, squinted their eyes at the boy

and dropped their jaws in even greater amazement. As he drew nearer, Spirk could make out snatches of their conversation, but try as he might, he could make no sense of it.

“I’m certain of it, Korith!” Spirk heard a rather large fat man tell the stranger who’d called to him, “He’s the one. He’s the one foretold!”

“Yes, by Frumda!” a second man told Korith with a tremulous voice, “He does bear the mark!”

“Dosin, Rundel,” the man called Korith said calmly, “We must speak with the boy first, that our prayers may be answered.”

Spirk was completely bewildered. Something in their conversation suggested these men thought him to be someone of great importance; he even believed they might be in awe of him. But that was ridiculous. Arriving at their table at last, he was able to get a closer look at his admirers and was quite shocked to find them ordinary – even non-descript. From the clothing they wore, they could as easily have been woodsmen as craftsmen or mercenaries. No more enlightened than he had been before, Spirk turned to the man called Korith and said “Yeah?”

“The simplicity of his words! The honesty! Surely, he is the boy of prophecy!” the thin man, Dosin, cried out enthusiastically.

“And look!” Rundel added, “He does bear the mark of the Rooster across his left eye...”

“That’s ‘Mark of the Griffin’ weren’t it, Rundel?” Korith corrected.

“Oh, aye...aye...so it is. And what a beautiful griffin it is, too.” Rundel agreed, reaching out hesitantly to trace the angry birthmark on Spirk’s face.

Still, Spirk found himself at a loss.

Finally, Korith spoke to him directly.

“I say, boy, my friends and I were wondering if...if er...we might have seen you somewhere before...?”

“Um, well...I sorta doubt it,” Spirk began. “See, I’m not from ‘round here. I’m from Bloodge, and I...”

“Bloodge?” Korith repeated in obvious amazement. “Did you say ‘Bloodge?’”

“Well, yeah, and...”

Korith threw himself down onto the filthy floor. “He is the boy of prophecy!” the man exclaimed to his eager companions. “He bears the mark and comes to us from Bloodge! He is the one!”

“At long last!” Dosin cried joyfully.

“Truly, we are saved!” Rundel added.

“Whu...whu...’scuse me?” Spirk stammered.

“What is your name, honored one?” Korith inquired humbly, tears of elation streaming down his cheeks.

“Me?” Spirk looked around. “Spirk. Spirk Nessno.” He answered.

“All hail Spirk!” Korith prompted his companions.

“All hail Spirk!” they obliged happily.

“Fuck Spirk!” someone in the crowed jeered in less than helpful fashion.

But Spirk was too caught up in the odd declarations of the trio before him to take any note of other goings on. “I...uh...don’t get it.” He announced unashamedly.

“Great Spurt...”

“Spirk. It’s ‘Spirk!’”

“Yes...yes, of course it is, noble Spirk!” Korith agreed. “Long have our people awaited your coming, and at last you have arrived.”

“I didn’t even know I was coming ‘til my Da gave me the boot last week...” Spirk protested.

“No, noble Sperm, your coming...er...your arrival was preordained, just as it is your destiny to lead our people out of oppression and into greatness.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” Spirk demanded, both disturbed and delirious as he began to feel the stirrings of greatness in his concave chest.

“Surely you know of the prophecy?” Rundel asked.

“Uh...’course. But...er...remind me a bit, okay?”

“Well...” Korith began, “the...the prophecy tells us that one of humble birth and bearing the mark of the rooster...”

“I thought it was a griffin,” Spirk interrupted.

“Why yes. Yes it is. My mistake.” Korith conceded. “Anyway, one of humble birth and bearing the mark of the griffin will one day...ah...”

“Arrive! Er...arrive and um...” Dosin added, excitedly.

“Arrive here! Yes, here at the Hog’s Tooth...” Rundel declared.

“Don’t be an idiot!” Korith growled under his breath as he elbowed his fat companion in the ribs. “Actually,” he said, “the prophecy don’t really mention the Hog’s Tooth specifically, but, er, it does lead one to believe that the savior will be found in an establishment such as this here!”

“And one day become King of the West!” Rundel added quickly, as if attempting to gain the last word.

“We’re in the East, fool.” Korith glared at him.

“Did I say West? Ha! I meant East o’ course. King o’ the East!”

“Really?” Spirk asked, barely able to contain his growing euphoria. Gods, wouldn’t his old man just die when he learned that ‘Spirk the Jerk’ had become King of the West! Or East.

“Oh yes, your magnificence!” Dosin fawned.

“Absolutely,” Korith agreed, again lowering his face to the floor.

“You bet!” Rundel said.

“Then I’m gonna be your king, eh?”

“Yes!” the three men insisted.

“Then...I could give you orders, for instance?” Spirk asked, anxious to begin reaping the benefits of his newfound greatness.

“Why, uh, I suppose so, yes.” Korith responded, with poorly masked surprise.

“Buy me a drink, then!” Spirk commanded.

After a brief moment of silence, during which Spirk’s three subjects glowered at each other in irritation, Korith finally said, “Majesty, it is unseemly for so great a monarch to refresh himself in so base a tavern. Please, my king, permit my friends and me to escort you to a more worthy establishment.”

“You mean, more expensive?”

“Aye.”

“Well, escort away then!” Spirk assented gleefully.

“Let us leave by the back door then, my friends,” Korith told his companions gravely, “that our king may not be mobbed by his adoring subjects.”

“What sayeth you, my subjects?” Spirk demanded, trying his best to sound regal, “I art not a’feared of the adorishments of my people.”

“Of course not, my king!” Korith quickly agreed. “I merely suggested we use the back door so that your loving subjects would not, in their excitement, tear your royal person limb from limb in search of souvenirs. But if you still wish...”

“Methinks thy first idea wert good, after all,” Spirk admitted. “Let us leave by the backdoor then, for sooth.”

And so, the odd processional marched toward the rear door: Korith, Rundel and Dosin in front, sporting the most solemn of expressions on their faces, and Spirk striding nobly behind them, his hand resting clumsily on the hilt of his father’s sword. As they passed out the door and into the damp night, Spirk sneered disdainfully at a couple of toughs who were beating an old drunk.

“I care not for violence in my kingdom,” Spirk proclaimed, stepping out of the tavern and into an oncoming fist. Instantly, he went blind with little white stars, but a follow-up kick to the stomach cleared his head.

“Whatsa matter, yer majesty?” He heard Rundel sneer. “Royal life too tough fer ya?”

“Lemme heap s’more ‘adorishments’ on ‘im!” Dosin cackled, smacking Spirk across the thighs with the flat of his old sword.

“Just take his valuables, if the cretin has any, and leave him to the scavengers!” Korith commanded, as he threw a knee into Spirk’s ribs.

And the abuse got worse after that, so that, in a matter of minutes, Spirk lay semi-conscious and bleeding in a mud puddle, as the derisive laughter of his assailants receded into the distance. “I care not for violence,’ Ha! Whatta rube!” he heard one of them say.

\*\*\*\*\*

Short grunted, pensively. “If we do this by the book...”

“What book? Janks here can’t read!”

“No,” said Short, “but you and I can. Anyway, it’s just a figure of speech.”

“Whereas I’m a figure of *action!*” Janks proclaimed.

“You’re a figure of moldering dunghill,” Long countered, “but let’s hear what Short’s got in mind.”

“But I...”

Short cut in. “What I meant was we’re still lacking a giant, a Shaper, and any number of worthy arms.”

Long and Janks just stared at him.

He continued. “Look, a good crew’s gotta have a little slight-of-hand, which I guess is Janks. It’s gotta have a leader. It’s gotta have a decent basher. And it’s gotta have some magic. Now, we...we’ve got a whoremaster...”

“I’m not a whoremaster!” Long objected.

“A cripple...” Short pointed to himself, “a scoundrel and, counting Spirk, an imbecile. Y’see what I’m saying, lads? We’re shy a bit of real flash and smash.”

Long Pete considered. “Yes, yes, I see. Can’t really call ourselves a decent merc squad without some magic and muscle. Any ideas, boys?”

“I hear there’s a mighty big fella over to Farnsley.” Janks said.

“None closer?” Long asked.

“War cleared ‘em all out. They was all pressed into service on one side or t’other. Surprised there’s anyone over five feet left alive, to be honest.”

“You? Honest? There’s a laugh.” Short snorted.

“So, Farnsley.” Long mused. “And what about the Shaper?”

“Well, there’s always D’Kem.” Janks answered.

“Dickum? Man’s a wastrel, a drunk.” Short said.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Janks replied. “And anyways, man’s good company.” He paused. “But he don’t like to be called ‘Dickum.’”

Short sneered. "Until he's sober enough to stop me, it's 'Dickum.' So, to recap: we've got ourselves a whoremaster, a cripple, a scoundrel, an imbecile, a drunk and a could-be, might-be, possible giant living in a town a good three days' travel from here."

"Well," Long observed, "one has to start somewhere. Now, uh..." he continued awkwardly, "there's the matter of leadership..."

"This whole crew was my idea!" Janks reminded them.

"And we still don't know it's a *good* idea. So, that counts you out. Plus, you can't read." Long said.

"What's readin' got to do with it?" Janks demanded.

Short ignored him. "So, it's down to Long and Short. But here's the brilliant bit: we let everyone *think* it's Long, but it's actually me. That way, our enemies will waste all their time trying to kill him, when it's really me they're after!"

Long bristled. "Now, wait a minute..."

"I like it!" Janks bellowed.

"Done!" Short said.

"But I..." Long Pete stammered.

And so it was decided.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Vykers and Arune, In the Forest

Fire. So often, it had been his weapon of choice. There was a time when he'd burnt an entire city to the ground (and salted the farmlands around it), even after its people had surrendered to his host. He hadn't just wanted to incapacitate them; he'd wanted to burn their collective spirit.

And now it bolstered his. After placing Arune's skull on a stone ledge inside his cave, Vykers set about gathering wood into a pile, and the Shaper set it ablaze. He worried briefly about smoke, but his ghostly companion seemed to have that covered as well. All-in-all, things were almost...pleasant.

And he must have dozed off, because Vykers jolted awake, disoriented and famished. Strangely, the fire looked unchanged.

"Burner."

A pause.

“Tarmun?”

“Don’t call me that. Why’s the fire look like that, same as when it started?”

“We needed the wood to get it started, but it’s not burning wood now.”

“Huh. What’s it burning?”

Another pause. “It’s complicated.”

“Fine, then. Look, I’m starving. I’ve gotta go out and find something to eat.”

“And if I said I could bring something to you?”

Vykers sat back on his haunches, thinking. “Why are you being so helpful?”

“You’d rather I didn’t help?”

“I just wanna know what you’re after, what it’s gonna cost me.” He spat, “I can’t see as I have anything you’d want. You an idiot, Burner?”

“Your meal has arrived” the shade said, and be-damned if Vykers didn’t hear snuffling and grunting near the cave’s entrance. In a moment, a wild pig wandered in.

“How’m I supposed to...”

And then it fell over dead, its legs kicking a final three or four times.

“That’s a hell of a trick. That work with people, too?”

“Not that well. People are a little harder to penetrate. Anyway, I’m afraid you’ll have to figure out how to butcher that beast on your own.” Arune said. “There’s not really a spell for that sort of thing, or, if there is, I’ve never heard of it.”

Vykers would like to have been more cautious, but this was more meat than he’d seen in he-had-no-idea-how-long. He scrambled into a corner and retrieved the sharpened stone fragment he used for gutting rodents and frogs. He found he was drooling like a simpleton. Before he could eat, though, he’d have to figure a way to cut up that pig and put some on the fire. Hard to do in his condition, but he had every reason to try.

\*\*\*\*\*

Young Aoife and Anders, At Home

With each day, Anders changed a bit more. He never became talkative in the fashion of regular folk, but neither was he as detached as he had been for the first several years of his life.

Quiet as he was, his eyes were alive and utterly engaged, utterly present in whatever was going on. It was creepy, really. To Aoife, he was like cat watching a mouse, biding its time and waiting to pounce. “What?” she used to challenge him, only to be greeted by further silence or, worse still, the faintest hint of a smile.

She remembered the day her father was ill and asked Aiofe to take Anders and tend to the sheep on the North meadow. It was the warmest, most pleasant day of spring, and Aiofe could not resist running barefoot through the grass and wildflowers. When she looked up, her brother was already a good distance away, kneeling before one of the lambs. As she watched, he took its head in his hands and snapped its neck. Aoife ran to him in anger and horror.

“What in all hells have you done?” she yelled.

When he saw her approaching, he winked at her, stopping her dead in her tracks. Slowly, he laid the lamb down on the grass and placed his hands on its side. Again, he looked up at her, as if about to impart a mischievous secret. He squinted at the lamb and clenched his jaw. And then it opened its eyes and struggled to get up. Anders stepped back. It jumped up and ambled off after the other sheep. The boy looked over at Aoife with a smile that was more frightening than anything she’d ever seen. He had killed that lamb and brought it back.

Aoife turned and ran home to her parents, crying in fear and confusion. When she finally reached them, her hysteria had grown so intense she was absolutely unable to communicate, and her parents simply stared at her, worried and bewildered.

“Calm down now, Sweet. Calm down” her mother urged. “Are you hurt?”

Aoife shook her head.

“Your brother, then. Is Anders hurt?”

Aoife let out a wail of terror.

“Is it Svarren?” her father cut in.

Again, Aoife shook her head, gasping for breath.

“Is it the sheep, then?”

Finally, Aoife found the breath to speak, just as the door opened again and Anders walked in. She stared at him, her mouth open, words on her tongue. He looked right into her eyes and then casually nodded to his parents before heading over to the wash basin to clean his hands. Aoife’s parents exchanged glances.

“Everything alright on the meadow, boy?” her father asked Anders.

He grunted in the affirmative. And then, “Everything is perfect,” which amounted to a monologue for Anders.

*Perfect? Far from it,* Aoife thought. But how could she ever convince her parents of what she’d seen? And what could they do about it?

Months went by, years evaporated, and while Aoife witnessed many strange and disturbing things from her brother – things that made her fear him like nothing else in her life -- he never revealed himself to his parents. They seemed to have no idea of what he’d become...or perhaps he had them under some sort of spell. Eventually, Aoife knew, she’d be expected to marry and make a home of her own somewhere else, leaving her parents alone with Anders until it was time for him, too, to make his own way. But the thought of leaving her parents alone with him, sleeping in the same house without her nearby to keep the boy in check was terrifying.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Vykers and Arune, In the Forest

Vykers lay back, firelight reflecting off the grease on his distended gut. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so full.

“Burner?”

“Vykers.”

“It’s time you told me what you want from me.”

“I felt I had to earn your trust first.”

“Not gonna happen. But, as you can see, I’m not really in a position of strength right now. So?”

“So...you’ve seen a small sampling of my abilities...”

“Mmmm.”

“And you must realize we’re in a similar predicament...me being completely without a body and you, dealing with a greatly damaged one.”

Vykers rolled over and looked at the skull, suddenly alert. “And...?”

“What if I said I could restore your hands and feet?”

“I’d say you’re full of shit.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy or enjoyable. But I can do it.”

“Huh. And you’re gonna ask some terrible price...”

“Terrible? I don’t think you’ll find it terrible.”

“You wanna eat my soul, or some such shit?”

“Eat your soul?” Arune laughed, “No. I’m not even sure that’s possible.”

“Well, spit it out, damn you! What’s the cost?”

“You’d have to allow me in, to share your body until such time as I found a more-suitable host.”

“Alheria’s poisonous tits! That’s some fuckin’ cost, alright.”

“It wouldn’t be permanent.”

“So says the spook.” Vykers scoffed. “You might be like the plague, not to be shook off for love or money.”

“I understand your skepticism. But I’m offering to restore your hands and feet in return.”

Vykers fell silent and turned away.

Arune waited.

“You wouldn’t think you’d miss being able to wipe your own ass.” Vykers finally said. “Destroyer of legions, brought low by his own stench.” He paused. “Fine, then. How do we do this?”

“Take my skull,” Arune answered, “and throw it into the fire.”

Vykers laughed. “Well, there’s one wish granted.”

He ambled over to the ledge, pinned the skull between his wrists and swung it towards the fire, letting it fall into the flames. “You’re one o’ the Burning now, in truth.” Almost immediately, he was overcome with a lassitude, a strange fuzziness of thought. The more he fought it, the worse it became, until he simply collapsed on his side in the dirt, writhing helplessly like a turtle on its back. Eventually, fatigue overcame him and he drifted into a fitful sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Later, he bolted upright in a panic. His head hurt. His vision was blurry. And his joints creaked. He felt hung over, was the problem. Terribly hung over. And he still had no hands or feet.

“Burner! Where the fuck are you?”

Without warning, he doubled over and vomited in the dirt.

“I know how you feel.” Arune muttered in his mind. “Actually, I *feel* how you feel.”

“Can’t you make this experience a little less...shitty?”

“I’m trying. Believe me. Whatever fairytales you may’ve heard, this kind of thing isn’t easy.”

Vykers grunted.

“I’m trying to work with your body, and it’s trying to throw me out.”

“Can’t say as I blame it.”

“And I thought you were immune to a little misery.”

\*\*\*\*\*

He’d had a sort of mentor when he was starting out, an old veteran by the name of Tewkes -- but everyone called him “Hobnail,” on account of he was always threatening to plant his hobnails in someone’s ass. “Tarmun,” he’d say “kill their spirits, and their bodies’ll follow hard after.”

Vykers killed ‘em, alright. By the hundreds of thousands. He spread corpses like fertilizer across the North, until the land was more lush and green than any time since Creation, itself.

Despite his injuries, his own spirit was very much alive and, even in a magic-induced fever dream, Vykers yearned to get back onto the battlefield.

\*\*\*\*\*

Long & Company, On the Road

In the absence of a consistent work force to maintain it, the road to Farnsley had become overgrown in places. In others, holes that ought to have been filled had simply gotten worse. It would have been slow-going under the best of conditions, but with the motley assortment of mounts the gang had been able to assemble, the mere three days’ journey was likely impossible.

“A goat, Nessno?” Long sniped. “Mahnus save me. Who rides a goat?”

“Well...it’s a big goat.” Spirk answered.

“And that makes two of ya.”

“Take it easy on the boy,” Short said. “If nothing else, we can eat the damned thing if food gets scarce.”

“And you!” Long shouted.

“Now don’t start in on my ram!”

“It’s a sheep. A bleedin’ sheep!”

“Ram! It’s a ram. Classic war mount of the Southern Dranavians.”

“Damned scrawny for a ram, ain’t it? And where’s his horns?”

“Yeah, and why don’t we eat him instead ‘o my goat? I like me some good mutton.”

“I am surrounded by idiots!” Long muttered.

“Look, Long, this here ram’s only got to carry but half of me, and it’s all I could afford. Anyway, it’s a lot further fall from the back of a horse.”

“And you wouldn’t be riding one, neither, if it weren’t for me!” Janks cut in.

“Yeah, thanks. You stole me a horse. Or at least she was a horse once upon a time. If you’ve got to risk the stocks, couldn’t you have found something a little less ready for the knackers? Or did you choose this old nag to humiliate me?”

“I am hurt, Long.”

“Morally hurt.” Spirk added.

“Mortally hurt.” Long corrected.

“That, too” said Spirk.

Long sat back in his saddle and surveyed the crew: Short Pete, the half-man, strapped to the back of a boney sheep; Spirk Nessno, standing – actually standing – astride a wall-eyed goat; Janks, sitting smugly on the back of a filthy draft horse and, of course, the old Burner, half asleep on the back of his donkey. It was as ridiculous and inauspicious a beginning as Long could imagine, but he figured perhaps – perhaps – they could purchase or steal better mounts later. He looked glumly at the road ahead and back at his friends. What in all hells was he doing?

“Whenever you’re ready, ‘boss,’ we’ll move out” he called over to Short Pete.

\*\*\*\*\*

It had been a long and tedious day without much progress. Farnsley seemed as far away as ever, but the campfire warmed the group’s spirits and loosened their tongues. All except D’Kem,

and Long found that especially irritating. The Burner slumped against a log and stared sleepily into the fire.

“Look here, Dickum. Are you a member of this expedition or ain’t ya?”

The Burner rubbed his stubbled chin and lifted his bloodshot eyes to Long Pete. “I am here.” He said, as if that explained everything.

“Oh,” Long replied with melodramatic surprise, “are ya, indeed? And how would we know that?”

Janks cut in, as expected. “There’s naught for him to do, yet, Long, except follow the road with the rest of us.”

“Why doesn’t he *talk* with the rest of us?

“Maybe he’s got nothing to say.”

“Or too much.” Spirk added blithely, causing D’Kem to glance over at him with an appraising eye.

“Too much? That’s rich. I bet he doesn’t know shit!” Long spat in the dust. “And you, Nessno! Ya spent more time walking *beside* that mangy goat than riding it. You’re slowing us all down.”

“Feffles don’t like to work so hard!” Spirk answered, defensively.

“Feffles?”

“That’s his name.” Spirk said.

“Feffles. Boil me in tallow. Fuckin’ Feffles.”

“Why are you so ornery tonight, Long?” Janks asked. “We made us some miles today, got a nice fire going, the stars are out and we got food.”

“Well said, Janks, well said!” Short cheered.

“Ooh, high praise, coming from the sheep rider!” Long retorted.

“It’s a *ram*! Gods, Long, why don’t you go take a piss or something? You’re souring the whole ambiance!”

“Amb...what?” Spirk said.

“It means ‘stew,’ Janks whispered to him.

“Oh!” Spirk responded, “I think the amby yawns is delicious!”

Long looked over at him with a jaundiced eye. “Yeah, I think I will go for a walk” he said, as he wrapped his cloak tighter about himself and wandered off into a nearby thicket.

This was a right balls-up, and no two ways about it, far as Long could see. Back in the day, a team like this would’ve had ten-to-twelve strong-armed and savvy veterans. They’d each have had specialized equipment – the best that money could buy or cunning could steal. They’d have had horses. Real ones. They’d have had a goal and a plan to carry it out. None of this bullshit charging off with your prick still hanging out. And it rankled him mightily that Short had seized command and done virtually nothing with it. Command weren’t no popularity contest. It was all about –

Long heard a dull grunt followed by a high shriek, back towards camp. He wheeled about and saw dark figures struggling in silhouette before the fire. Drawing his short sword, Long ran in their direction. As he got near, he could see Short down in the dirt, while Janks and Spirk each struggled with separate arms of a single attacker. A second man held a knife at D’Kem’s throat and was shaking him violently. Long bellowed in what he hoped was a terrifying manner and threw himself at the back of the already besieged attacker, leaving D’Kem to his own devices. With three men climbing all over him, pulling him to and fro, the first assailant toppled sideways into the fire, where he landed with a scream of alarm. Fire was working its mischief elsewhere, as well, as the second assailant’s beard burst into flames that quickly enveloped his head. Soon, both attackers were screaming in earnest. In a moment, they managed to right themselves and scramble off into the dark, fanning the flames as they went.

Long took a deep breath and resheathed his sword. He did a quick survey of his companions. Janks and Nessno seemed okay, if rattled. D’Kem had slumped back down against the log, and Short was still lying on his side.

“Planning to sleep through all our scrapes, are ya?” Long asked him, sardonically.

Short didn’t respond.

“Hey, Short, they put a scare into you?” But as Long approached, he could see that his friend was dead. There was a bloody, jagged hole at the base of his neck on the left side, between the clavicle and shoulder blade, as if one of the attackers had come up behind him and...

Long sank to his knees, lowered his forehead ‘til it touched Short’s cheek.

“Long Pete?” Spirk ventured.

“Fuck off.” Long replied.

“Now hold on, Long.” Janks objected, “He was our mate, too.”

Long wasn't interested. "He died for nothing, you stupid shit! For nothing! All this farting about in the woods at night, that's child's play! That's wooden swords and unicorns and mountains of gold. It's all crap!"

"It ain't crap. Short believed in it, too."

Long rolled onto his back and watched the smoke rise into the night sky. "He was my oldest and dearest friend, was Short. And he died for nothing."

"He died how he wanted to die, Long. On the road, doing. Being. Not stuck back in town, a burden to his community. Short wanted this journey as bad as anyone."

"There's few can choose the manner of their deaths" D'Kem croaked from across the fire.

Long sat up. "Who the fuck asked you, old man? Where was all your wizarding when my friend was sent packing?"

D'Kem fell silent again.

"We go back." Long said, after a lengthy pause.

"That's not what Short woulda wanted." Janks answered.

"Yeah, well, he's dead. We ain't...yet."

"We can't go back, anyway, Long." Janks breathed.

"We can't? Who says?"

"I do. We can't go back, because I stole from the town hall's coffers to pay for this trip. We go back, they'll put us all in the stocks, sure."

Long couldn't remember ever having felt so old, so worthless.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Vykers and Arune, In the Forest

Vykers was furious. But his voice was cold, steady. "You're a woman."

"I was," Arune answered dryly. "Now, I'm a man."

"You knew if you'd told me, I'd have never agreed to this."

Arune laughed. "Oh, you would have, you would have. The offer was too sweet."

He felt a moment of panic, something like claustrophobia. "Where's my hands and feet?"

“I can’t repair them overnight. It’ll take a while.”

Vykers brooded.

“Don’t worry, though. It’s in my best interest to make you whole again, unless we want to spend eternity in this cave.”

Another silence.

“Ah. You’re worried I’ll make you weak, then, is that it? You think that because I was a woman, you’ll start collecting flowers?” Arune asked. “You don’t know women.”

“I know...”

“No, you don’t.”

“You can read my thoughts, can you?”

“Not yet,” Arune admitted. “You’ve let me into the castle, so to speak, but kept me out of the throne room.”

“And how do I know I can trust you?”

“Does it matter, at this point?”

Again, Vykers was silent.

“Look, I’ll share this with you: you don’t have to speak aloud to me. If you wish me to hear your thoughts, I will. That could work in our favor in any number of situations.”

“For instance, it’ll save me looking like a babbling idiot wherever I go.”

“Wherever *we* go.” Arune corrected.

Vykers scowled and looked into the fire.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Young Aoife and Anders, At Home

And then came the day Aoife woke up to find her parents butchered and her brother casually eating a crust of bread near the fire. Emotions assailed her so heavily, the girl could not speak. Anders glanced at her as he might a fly that had landed on his arm.

“I was going to do this eventually,” he explained in a flat voice. “I thought I might as well get it over with.”

Aoife felt her heartbeat in every part of her body, in her fingertips, in her toes, in her eyes, and in her tongue. "And me?" she managed.

"You?" Anders laughed. "You, I'm going to leave alive."

Every word was an effort. "But why?" Aoife asked.

"Why what? Why did I kill our parents or why am I letting you live?" He shrugged. "The answer's the same, I suppose: because I can. Because I'm going to keep doing this – killing – until you stop me." His smile made her flesh crawl. "Do you think you can, sister? You think you're up the challenge?" He tossed the remains of his meal into the fire, got to his feet. "Because I'm going to kill everyone and everything I meet until this world's naught but a smoking ruin." He paused. "What do you think about that, eh, sister?"

She watched in silence as he threw a cloak over his shoulders, hefted a large sack he had hidden behind him and strode over to her. He bent towards her until their noses were nearly touching. His eyes were afire with dark, seductive energy and intent. Slowly, slowly he drew closer until his cold lips brushed lightly against hers. She felt his tongue snake into her mouth, and then she felt nothing at all.

She had terrible dreams, nightmares beyond imagining or explanation, and when she awoke, she found herself in a pool of sweat in the middle of the floor. There was a dampness between her legs that she dared not investigate or even consider, for it suggested things too abhorrent to be borne.

The bodies of her parents were as she'd seen them earlier – broken and blood-drenched, draped over their bed like filthy, discarded clothing. Aoife felt a hollowness in her gut that made her ill. She staggered outside for some air and was steeled by a cold rain on her face.

Kill him? Kill *him*? Gladly...but how?

\*\*\*\*\*

Vykers and Arune, In the Forest

"I would have thought self-pity was beneath you."

Vykers wouldn't rise to the bait. *Where's the hands and feet you promised?* He thought back at her. He felt her pause, sigh.

*You're not going to like this, but what else is new?* she responded.

*Let me guess, you lied about this, too,* he sent, disgusted.

*No. Not entirely.* And then she was silent.

*Another game. Okay, 'not entirely.' What, then? I'm to get rat's feet? Hooves? What?*

*They'll be incorporeal.*

*They'll be what? What's that mean?*

*You'll be able to use your hands and feet soon, just like always. But they'll be invisible.*

*Invisible? What the hell kind of bullshit is this? How the hell am I supposed to use a sword?*

*You'll figure it out. Or wear gloves. It's the best I can do. I'm a Shaper, not a Mender. And you'd need one of the best to restore your hands and feet completely.*

“Is there no fucking end to this nightmare?” Vykers roared aloud.

*Take what I've offered, and you can walk out of this cave by dawn tomorrow. Arune suggested. What is it with you men, anyway? When you're down to one choice, you always love to pretend you **have** a choice.*

*Fine!* Vykers replied petulantly. *Gimme the ghosty parts.*

*There's one more thing...*

Vykers yelped in pain. It was nothing he couldn't handle; he'd known pain of every kind. But the sudden shock of it caught him off guard.

*Gods, I'm burning all over. What **is** that?*

*That, my friend, is the cost of channeling and shaping magic. It's what we feel every time we make the effort. It is, in fact, the reason we're called 'Burners.'*

Vykers was shivering, pulsing and shaking by turns. *Thought it was because you loved fire.*

Arune snickered. *Hardly. Pain is the price for using magic. The more we use it, the bigger the effort, the more it burns throughout our bodies. More than a few of my brethren have been driven mad by it, others try to deaden themselves with smoke or drink.*

*I'm not surprised.* Vykers thought in reply, wiping sweat from his brow.

*But some, some become addicted to the sensation. They're the ones you want to avoid. They're the ones...*

Vykers couldn't understand the rest, wracked as he was with uncontrollable spasms. Eventually, all he could do was moan.

\*\*\*\*\*

He could stand. It was hard to believe, since there was no obvious means of support beneath his ankles, but it was hard to deny as well.

Vykers grinned. "That's more like it!" He made a fist.

*Can you feel that?*

*Yes.* He laughed. *It's the damnedest thing. Feels just like it should.*

*Do you trust me now?*

Again, he laughed. *Not a chance!*

*What's next?*

*I need a weapon.*

*Have you forgotten my other talents?*

*Let's just say I'm not anxious to feel that burning again.*

*You're smarter than you let on.*

*Part of my training. Now, I think I'll make me a good, heavy staff and a couple of spears.* Vykers said, looking out into the morning through the mouth of the cave. *And then...then, the long slog back to civilization.*