

A Warm Heart

A Short Fantasy Story by

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Boilerplate Stuff

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For as long as I could remember, I slept with a knife up my sleeve, whether my roof was stone or starlight. When you've no one else, you learn to put your faith in steel. Shuffling noises made me instinctively thrust my right hand up my left sleeve and pull out the blade silently, even while still half-snared by slumber.

I blinked my eyes open, holding the blade in front of my face. A dark shape moved by the entrance of the crevice — too humble to be called a cave — I'd slept in. Badger, perhaps. Too small for a bear. Silently, I rose to my haunches. The thing rummaged around my food bag, and I clenched my teeth; I'd be using my knife after all. Animal intrusion is no great offense — after all, this is their domain — but when a man is on such a long road as I, dried beef and piss-poor wine is providence divine.

Creeping forward in the darkness, I sprang upon the creature, rolled it on its back and held the knife to its throat.

“Stop!”

It takes a lot for a trained killer — well, *almost* a trained killer in my case — to stop in his tracks and obey an order, just like a finger-click. And yet, inexplicably, I did just that.

Something in the voice compelled me to listen. I squinted.

A child.

The runt tried to wriggle its head away from my grip, but I held firm.

“Who are you?” I said.

The child said nothing, but tried to wriggle free again. When it finally opened its eyes, it fixated on the knife. Understandably, I suppose. “All right, then,” I said, and tossed the weapon across to my bedroll, where it landed with a soft puff. “I won't kill you. Probably. Look at me.

Look at me!”

The child did so, shaking, eyes wide in the darkness. I relaxed my grip, but when the child tried to bolt, I tightened it, and the child stopped struggling.

“Please, sir—”

“Do I look like a knight, child?”

The child stayed silent.

“No. No more than you look like a scion.”

The child relaxed a little and let out a huffy sigh. I reached into my food bag, brought out some dried beef and offered it some. It squinted at me, perhaps suspicious, so I took a bite to reassure it, and chewed the salty, leathery flesh with as much of a smile as I could muster so early in the pissing morning. A skinny hand snatched the beef on offer and posted it into a chapped mouth. The sight of the wastrel ravenously devouring the morsel brought a pang of memory, and I softened my countenance just a little.

“So, then,” I said. “Who are you?”

A shrug. “Nobody.”

Bloody children.

“I see. Well then, Nobody. Would you like shelter for the night?”

I curse my conscience sometimes.

I built a modest fire, as large as I dared in such a tiny lodging, and boiled some herbal tea for the wretch. I fancied a cup myself, but a lone traveller has scant need to weigh himself down with an extra mug. In the firelight, the child pulled its hood down.

A girl.

Only just, though. With the amount of muck and shit on her, she could have been a troll. She carried twelve, maybe thirteen years on her back, though it was hard to tell: a youth spent in beggary adds hard lines. Every time I happened across a looking glass, it reminded me of that hard fact.

“What do I call you, sir?” she said, sipping at the tea, a poor broth of lemon thyme and rosemary.

“Call me what you bloody well like, so long as it’s not ‘sir’.”

“Where are you going?”

“None of your bloody business.” When she looked sullen, I relented a tad. I couldn’t tell the poor runt I was travelling in order to kill a man, but perhaps I didn’t have to be such a hard bastard about it. “A long way from here.”

She nodded. “Good for you. There’s only shit and bones here. I’d do anything to be a long way from here.” She paused, sipping some tea. It probably didn’t taste too good, but it was hot, and wet. Sometimes that’s enough. “I could come with you.”

“No.”

“But—”

“No.” I chewed grumpily on another strip of beef before tucking the rest away, making sure I kept my food bag a little closer to my end of the bedroll. “Where do you come from, Nobody?”

She cocked her head out of the cave. “Malagath.”

I’d left Malagath not four days ago, after receiving my final instruction from the Black Eye. It was a shithole, a vipers’ nest. “Me too.”

“So what are you, some type of trader?”

I laughed, and cast a hand over my paltry belongings. “By the Chryst, no! What do you suppose I have to sell?”

Another shrug. “Your services.”

I grunted at that. “I need more sleep.” I pulled my food bag shut and glared at Nobody. “Stay by the fire for a time, if you like. But when I wake I want you gone.” I started to roll over, but stopped myself. “And if you try to steal my food I’ll beat you black.” I glared at her to make sure she got the message before rolling over and shutting my eyes.

#

To my surprise and pleasure, my little cave was indeed empty when the birds’ chorus woke me the next morning. Next to the moldering ash of last night’s fire, my food bag was untouched. I allowed myself a wry little smile as I crawled out of the bedroll for a scratch and a stretch. I wouldn’t really have beaten her black; a man’s got to have a code, especially in a business as cruel as mine. At the same time, my side is no place for a child, no matter how smart. Sometimes a threat can be kinder than a mug of tea.

The country road on a summer morning is a beautiful thing, a strip of possibility. At that time of year the herbs grow wild by the side of the road, the birds offer sweet melodies, and the canopy provides dappled shade, a great boon to the walker when the sun is high. At a steady pace it’d take me another week of walking south to reach the crystal towers of the Chrysthall. A breakfast of hard cheese and salt brisket set me on my way.

By the time the sun reached its apex, I'd made good progress. The road out of Malagath ran alongside a busy little stream flowing toward the city. That being the case, it was safe to drink. A word from those in the know: don't drink downriver of any city, let alone one as fetid as Malagath.

After refilling my canteen, I rewarded myself with a long piss into the bushes. While I was still midflow, the leaves behind me rustled gently. My ears pricked up, and I swore; it's a callous and cruel thing to sneak up on a man when he's mid-piss, and I've no time for it. I spun around to two shit-stained men who stopped in their tracks: one scrawny and carrying a thin, nasty-looking knife; the other chubby and carrying a fat, nastier-looking axe. No doubt they'd meant to slit my throat while I pissed, but these were no silent footpads. They glared at me through bloodshot eyes.

"Giss your gold," Thin spat through broken teeth. "And we'll fuck off. Or we slit you and take it anyway, leave you to bleed in the water."

I ran my tongue round the bottom of my teeth. There was a bit of dried beef there from the night before. I tongued it out and chewed up the morsel. "You will allow a man the dignity to tuck his cock away after a piss," I said. Before they could answer, I stuffed it back into my breeches, and whipped out a short knife from the very same place. I leaped at Thin, away from Fat so he couldn't reach me with his axe. Thin slashed wildly, hitting only air. I rolled past his ankles, getting a pleasant noseful of wild lavender, dug my knife into his calf and twisted it, hard. He screamed as he toppled over, scrabbling at his flip-flopping leg, turning the pretty lilacs red. I sprang up at Fat, who lunged at me, predictably arcing his rusty, nasty axe over his shoulder. A sidestep meant it simply crashed into the soft earth with a dull thump. Before he could wrench it free from the earth, I rolled behind him, slashed the backs of his thighs, and he toppled over, screeching unintelligible curses at me. I knelt between them as they groaned and clutched their wounded legs with crimson hands, trying in vain to shuffle away on their backsides.

"Don't kill us, mate," said Thin.

Fat just gurgled something through gnashed teeth, looking at me with a mixture of fear and rage. His breath stank. I pitied the poor bastards, truth be told.

“I won’t kill you,” I said. I bashed their skulls together, and resolved to bind their wounds so they’d be able to return to the city when they woke up.

As I wiped my blade upon Thin’s oversized clothes, another noise sounded behind me. A *click* this time, not the snap of a twig — something inorganic. This time I didn’t turn around. One learns to differentiate one sound from another quickly in my line of work, and the click of a crossbow bolt is one you either learn, or die.

“Clever bastards,” I said, raising my hands. “So there are three of you.”

“You fight well, sonny,” he said. The slight quiver in his voice told me he was nervous, but also that he must have been a good six yards behind me, possibly on the other side of the stream. Too far to rush him, then. Sometimes you’ve got to know when you’re beaten. I had work to do.

“May I turn?”

“No. Drop yer gold and piss off.”

The rattle in his voice was almost as loud as the rattle in his crossbow. I turned anyway, slowly, dropping the knife and putting my hands in the air. His grip on the weapon trembled. He’d be a terrible shot, but crossbows aren’t to be trifled with.

“I have no gold,” I said, voice assured. “The only money I carry is two shiny pennies, and I need them both. It would be better for both of us if you put down your weapon, as I have, and we both be on our way. Because if you miss, or you don’t fell me with one shot, you know what I’ll do to you.”

A slight waver in his handling of the crossbow, and a flit of the eyes to the wounded bodies of his mates, told me he was considering my excellent solution to the impasse. Yet, to my utter surprise, he spluttered, jerked forward, coughed up blood, and looked at me with something approaching suspicion of foul play. I don’t know why; it wasn’t *my* fault. As the crossbowman fell, quite dead, I crouched, grabbed my knife and guarded myself for another assault, but instead, there stood behind him the slip-thin figure of Nobody, a short, bloody knife in her hand. I sighed and dropped my hands, the tension dripping out of me.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” I said, getting to my feet and irritably stashing my knife away.

“He was about to kill you,” she said in that insufferably superior tone only children have.

“He really wasn’t.”

“He had a crossbow.”

“He was putting it down.”

“He really wasn’t.”

I breathed out, pinched the bridge of my nose and started again. “Why did you follow me, girl?”

“I thought we could travel together.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “I travel alone. And you have nothing I want or need.”

“Yes, I do. I just saved your life.”

That took things too far. I hadn’t spent the best years of my life training to become a bloody milk-nurse. Muttering under my breath, I gathered my things and turned away, but her voice called me and stopped me once more. I turned, against my better judgment, and started. She was inches from me. It’s rare that a man of my skills is caught off guard, but I don’t mind admitting that whatever trick she’d played had done just that.

“I jumped,” she said, matter-of-factly, sensing my discomfiture. Up close she smelled pretty bad. Her hair clung to her forehead in unwashed clumps, and she had more dark lines around her eyes than any waif of her age had the right to expect.

I eyed the stream suspiciously, thinking there might have been a bridge that I’d missed somehow. There wasn’t. Must have been almost twelve feet wide where she crossed. “That was a big jump.”

“Anyone can make a leap if they believe they can.”

I blinked. “Right. You’re not going to leave me alone, are you?”

“Not yet.”

I shook away my incredulity and stared at the rough leather of my food bag. That was real enough. Her eyes followed my own to the bag. “If you want anything out of that,” I said, “then you’re carrying it.”

#

How the Chryst a girl could have so many questions in her stupid head was beyond me.

Who are you?

Where are you headed?

How'd you get so good at fighting?

Where'd you get those shoes?

“For the sake of the Chryst, shut your fucking mouth, girl!” I eventually said, when we were halfway down the road from somewhere to nowhere. Silence followed, but it was a tense silence, not the peace I'd wished for, and I immediately regretted the outburst. And regretting such blissful silence pissed me off even more. A man shouldn't feel guilty about his well-earned peace, but all too often does, I've found.

By evening we'd made good progress toward the Chrysthall, and I found us a place to camp well hidden from the road, under the sad droop of a lakeside willow hiding amid a maze of proud reeds. A scrawny rabbit stewed with herbs was our feast, and despite the badgering of my companion I declined to add some of my dried beef to the broth for flavor. Even so, it needed salt. As I reached into my bag to find the small bag of salt flakes I carried with me, Nobody gasped. Too late I realized why. As I'd reached across, my sleeve had hitched up, revealing the ornate tattoo on the inside of my forearm. I cursed my clumsiness.

“You're a Black Blade,” she said in an awed hush.

I looked down accusingly at the inked two-handed sword wreathed in smoke, denoting my affiliation. Stupid fool!

“I don't know what you mean,” I said with a gruff growl. As soon as I said it, I knew I couldn't have sounded convincing.

Nobody looked at me with curious eyes. “An assassin of Malagath. The way you fought. The way you used short knives rather than a sword. I'm right, aren't I?”

Perceptive little shit. No use in denying it; she'd never believe a denial. “I only got my first ink. When I complete my first kill, I get my second sword inked in.”

Her eyes lit up. “When do you get three swords?”

I laughed grimly. “No one does. Only the Black Eye has three inked swords, and inked eyes watching over them.”

“The Black Eye?”

“The Master of our League. Nobody knows who the Black Eye really is. He comes and goes like the wind.” I grimaced, annoyed at myself for having talked so much.

“So you’ve not actually killed anyone yet?”

“Shut up, girl, unless you want to be the first!”

She frowned and grumpily chewed at a piece of rabbit.

“Tarqvist,” I eventually said, thinking to change the subject.

“What?”

“What, what, are you deaf and stupid? My name, girl. It’s Tarqvist. Pour me some more broth.”

As she splashed it into my bowl, I looked at her. What was that thing she did, back at the stream, after she’d killed that bandit? It unnerved me still. The reasoned part of me told me she probably did just jump; I’d been turned away for a few seconds longer than I reckoned. It happens: blood’s up during a fight, does funny things to time. But the other part of me...

“You shouldn’t have killed that man, earlier,” I said.

She shrugged. Callow youth!

“You wounded the other two pretty badly.”

“A wounding is not the same as a killing. You did not have to take a life. Do you know what it’s like to take a life from someone? To take away everything he has in one crude thrust? The air he breathes, the enjoyment he finds, the sadness, the treasures of memory, the sounds of his children, the smell of his wife, the—”

“All right, I get it.”

“You do not, girl. It is a terrible thing. If I take a life, it is because I must.”

She ruffled up her grubby forehead. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

“Oh, I do. I was much like you, once,” I said. “Flea-bitten, mangy, destitute. Stole to live: food, sometimes wine. I was a decent thief, though not a brilliant one. What little heart I had was ice. I must have been your age when one day I tried to steal some fish from Pessingham market—”

“I know there. I used to run down there. We called it Pissingham market.”

I laughed. “Small world, especially for those with fuck-all, eh? I’ll never forget that day. Hot bastard day, it was. Sun pounding down like a slavemaster. Some fishmongers didn’t get their

ice on time. By the Chryst, the smells! I eyed the busiest stall — best fat, fresh fish — and snuck among the big people, kicked one in the back of the knee, made him topple a bit, and in the kerfuffle, made off with a bag of clams for boiling.”

She smiled. “I like clams. You can make jewelry with the shells.”

“Well, I wasn’t as clever as I thought. The trader’s son — a fat, slobbering thing — saw me, followed me down the next alley, and cornered me. I pulled my knife on him.” I whipped out my own knife to emphasize the point. “I leapt upon him and put the blade to his throat. It was then I felt a hand on my shoulder that yanked me away.”

“Who?”

“I would have killed that boy.” I supped some more rabbit broth. “I would have sliced his neck open and made him bleed to death a few yards from his loving father. For fucking clams.”

I hadn’t thought about the day Brothyr Leigh had grabbed my shoulder and saved my life for quite some time. At the time, I never realized how close I was to being caught by the adults, had I killed that boy. If they hadn’t torn me limb from limb, sure as shit the city judiciary would have taken my head. Good old Brothyr Leigh. All soft grey beard and softer bloody brains. “*It’s a harsh world, Tarqvist,*” he used to say. “*And that makes it all the more important that you keep a warm heart.*” What a pile of horseshit that turned out to be. To survive in a cold world, you need a cold heart. A heart of steel.

I placed my hand to my breast pocket and felt the nub of the little silver bell I had found amid his robes after he’d gone. I pulled it out, looked it over — the silver was now just a tarnished smudge — and gave it a little ring.

“What’s that?” said Nobody.

I smiled, and gently shook it again. “Let me show you something.” I showed her the bell, then waved my other hand over it, clicked my fingers theatrically, misdirecting her gaze, and when she looked again to my hands, the bell was gone.

She laughed. “Oh! Where’s it gone?”

“Look under your seat.”

She did as she was told — that was a first — and pulled the little silver bell from beneath her tatty bedroll. She gave it a little ring to see if it was the same bell. “Oh, shit.” She eyed me suspiciously, as though I’d offended her with the trick. “How’d you do that?”

I stuck my lip out and raised my eyebrows in mock humility. “It’s magic.”

The fleeting smile that had lit up after the trick melted into that cynical frown again. Her eyes glowered darkly behind the dance of the fire. “There’s no such thing as magic.”

I stared at her. She certainly was an odd fish, this one. She stood up, breathed in and out slowly, in the same way I often did before combat, but then turned and walked away. I saw her slump down, cross-legged, a few yards away in the darkness. Capricious little thing. Still, I judged not. A faint tugging, coming somewhere from my past — Brothyr Leigh’s work-roughed hands grabbing at my shoulder again — filled me with some annoying sense of duty toward this girl. But not tonight. Tonight she could sit by her bloody self.

#

It was another two days before we reached the Fjord of the Skye: a rich, green ravine bisected by the river Ty, a strong, still sword of aquamarine driving toward the ocean. The uphill walk tired my calves, which burned in protest. I always enjoyed that burn; made me know I was using my body. I picked up my pace, and when Nobody complained, I just laughed at her.

“Come on, girl; a fit, young strip like you moaning about a few steps up a hill?” I called down after her.

Nobody reached the top of the hill, panting and glaring. I pulled an apple from my sack as she made the last few yards. As I offered her a slice, I felt something poke me in the ribs. The point of Nobody’s knife prodded at my jerkin. When I looked at her in disgust, she pulled the knife away. “Never forget,” she said, stashing it. “You might be stronger than me. But I’m quicker than you over a yard. Sometimes that’s all you need.”

I have little time for smart-ass kids, but I realized then I had even less time for smart-ass kids who are right. She probably didn’t even mean to, but she reminded me I shouldn’t be trusting anybody on the road, no matter how dopey and sullen they appeared on the outside. Truth was, I liked her. She could be somebody, if she put her mind to it. Better that than waste her life being a street rat. “Here, girl, have some of this apple and look at this.”

She took the apple with a grimace and tucked into it. I pointed across the fjord, and her gaze followed. For once, the sullen countenance melted, and she gasped, bits of half-chewed apple toppling from her mouth.

Across the rocky fjord, dotted with obstinate evergreens craning toward the Sun, rose the spire of the Chrysthall. It truly was a magnificent sight, one to rip the breath from you and latch on to your eyes like fishhooks. It must have stretched three hundred yards into the sky, an icy splinter of colored glass, shining a thousand thousand colors, glistening like jewels, all erupting from the earth like an explosion that had somehow been captured in a single image.

“See the sunlight being caught on all the sides of the glass and making the different colors, girl? They say it’s the magic of the Chryst caught here on Earth so all men could see it.”

“It’s called a prism.”

I laughed. “Hah! It’s not a prison, girl. Though they do have a few dungeon pits, I hear. Hotter than a kiln, so they say. Not the sort of place you want to be detained.”

She offered me a funny look and shook her head. I reveled in the great sight of this edifice; it was hard to believe that men — and ancient men, at that — could have the skill to build such things, but there it was. From the tip of the fjord’s ridge it wasn’t possible to see the settlements at the bottom of the Chrysthall, but I’d have to get through them.

“It is impressive,” she said at last. “Is this where you’re heading?”

“It is. I have to see a man about a job.”

She made another face at me, as though I’d disgusted her. “Shit, you’re not one of those zealot nuts are you? Waving books and fire and going on and on about the Chryst burning people in pits below the earth at the end of time? I thought the Blades didn’t go in for that?”

I turned to Nobody as she chewed on her apple, surveying the Chrysthall with ever-decreasing wonder. “A friend of mine used to say that the mark of a truly good man is to maintain a warm heart in a cold world. A true friend; he saved me from myself and set me on a good path. One day he was attacked by a gang of vagabonds intoxicated by pearl and coral dust. When they found he carried nothing of value, they dragged him away and killed him. When I went after him...” I cleared my throat, trying to disguise the choke in it, and pressed my hand to the soft swell of the bell in my breast pocket. Of Brothyr Leigh’s belongings, it alone remained,

the only thing those vicious animals had left behind of him. I swallowed the age-old sense of sickness and grief; it didn't do to show emotion, whether there was a child present or not.

She looked up. "And?"

"And what?"

"What's the point of this story?"

I wiped my face and blew some snot out of my nose. Brothyr Leigh had been wrong. You didn't need a warm heart in a cold world. You needed steel. I pressed my hand against the hilt of my dagger for reassurance, and clenched my fingers, feeling the strength in them. "Point is, I'm no bloody zealot. That's all you need to know about me."

Her eyes flicked to my fingers upon the hilt of my dagger. I had blades concealed all over my person. In a fight, one never knows where one's hands are likely to end up, but I always kept my best dagger for show. Misdirection, if you like. Here I made no attempt to disguise my fingering of that weapon.

She gave a knowing half-smile. "You're going to kill one of the Chryst Followers, aren't you?"

I almost smiled. For once, she was wrong: I wasn't there to kill one of the Chryst Followers. At least, I assumed not. Even so, I kept my little smirking victory private; I knew she'd have on that infuriating frown either way, so I ignored her. Down the fjord I strode, waiting for her to stumble after me. "See that settlement there?" I said, pointing to the higgledy-piggledy clump of shitty brown huts and houses leaning together by the shoreline. When she nodded, I said, "There's a ferry crossing there. Here's where we part ways."

"What? No. We don't. I'm going with you. We're partners."

At that I clenched my jaw, dug my heels into the gravelly hillside, turned to face Nobody and jabbed a finger at her. "We were never partners. At best you were a leech. A bloody loud one. And where I'm going is no place for a girl, no matter how weird you are. If you know what's best for you, you'll piss off now and leave me be."

Another of those sullen stares. I relented, sighing into the cool evening air. "You have gifts, girl, I'll say that much of you. Nurture them. Grow older. Live. Find somewhere other than that shithole Malagath to hone them. Maybe someday I'll see you again."

I turned away and strode down the hillside, almost certain she'd be at my tail within seconds. When I turned back after a minute to find she hadn't moved, a part of me stabbed with disappointment, but the better part of my judgment pushed it aside and told me to focus on meeting the Arch Fathyr of the Chryst. Whatever he told me to do — whomever he told me to kill — this would be the end of my old life, and the start of the new.

I approached the ferryman — a wizened, shirtless simpleton whose only possessions appeared to be his ferry, a pole for pushing it, and a toothless frown.

“Penny, penny!” he said, thrusting a skinny, warty hand toward me. I placed one of my two pennies in his hand. He bit it, stuffed it somewhere in the grotty folds of his breeches, and invited me aboard.

I sat in the stern of the little ferry — more of a creaky raft, in honesty — and closed my eyes as we shifted slowly toward the imposing spire of the Chrysthall.

When a great thump rang in my ears and the ferry lurched violently, I instinctively gripped the sides. The ferryman swore and pointed behind me. I spun round onto all fours as the raft righted itself, and saw Nobody haplessly trying to balance on tiptoe on the edge of the raft.

“Girl! What the—”

But before I finished she slipped into the thick, choppy foam of the river Ty. I instinctively thrust out a hand, too late.

“Girls, girls!” the ferryman complained miserably, pointing his pole where Nobody had fallen in.

I looked to the river for a sign of her, but caught nothing. Why had she followed me? I screwed up my face and punched the raft. “Stop pushing.”

The ferryman bared his teeth and craned his neck to the sky. “Wait, wait. Pennies, pennies!”

Sometimes you do things without thinking about it. I was pretty sure that's what Nobody had done: tried to jump onto the raft to be with the closest thing she'd had to a friend in, well, perhaps forever. Shitty old me. And I did the same thing: pulled off my boots and leaped into the cold froth of the Ty.

With some effort I kept my eyes open underwater, but the water was dark and thick. I wasn't such a good swimmer, and I don't know how much time passed until my lungs screamed at me to get up and out, but it didn't seem long. Mottled sunlight spat its way beneath the

surface, and I broke toward it in a stream of bubbles, spluttering and hacking up dirty, silty water, blinking in the light. No Nobody. No nothing.

“You stupid girl!” I raged at no one in particular. The river offered no response, simply flowing cruelly toward the place where the golden valleys met and drifted out to sea. A few yards upstream of me, the ferryman and his raft remained.

“Up, up, ha! Dead, dead, girl, girl!” he raved, punting the raft toward me. I splashed toward it, quite breathless, and hauled myself up with another bout of coughing.

“Go, go!” cried the ferryman, hopping from one foot to another, face creased up in agitation like a court fool.

I blew some snot out of my nose and wiped my face. I waved my hand in the direction of the far side of the fjord. “Go, then. Go!” I groaned, and turned back to the river. I lied to myself that the wet sting in my eyes was just the muddy water, and that the choke in my throat was just something I’d swallowed.

#

After clambering up the greasy steps hewn into the fjord rock, in a miserable and desperate mood, I presented myself to the guards at the outer wall of the Chrysthall.

The Chrystengard. The personal guard of the Chrysthall and the Arch Fathyr, and the finest spearmen in the land, if you believe their reputation. I’m not one for reputations. I prefer the glint in a man’s eye when he’s faced with a lunatic armed with a rusty knife and crazed on pearl dust. That’s when you get the measure of a man. The Chrystengard were just a bunch of puffed-up ponces with moneyed fathers and silver ladles stuck up their asses, a hundred times removed from any real conflict. One of the guards made no attempt to disguise the wrinkling of his nose as he got close to me, halberd held firmly across the garish purple and yellow stripes of his leather uniform. Why these Chryst Followers always felt the need to display the piety of their souls with such hideous uniforms was beyond me. Can’t say I blamed him for the nose-wrinkle, though. Stinking of muck and dripping like a drowned rat, eyes red with dirt and loss, I probably didn’t much look like the usual guests they received here.

“I’ve an appointment with the Arch Fathyr,” I muttered irritably at one of the guards.

He thinned his eyes and looked me up and down, fingers tightening around the shaft of his spear. “And who might you be, stranger?”

I glowered at him as I pulled my sleeve up, revealing the ink on my forearm. He blinked, doing a poor job of hiding his disbelief, and stood away from the mighty glass gate, gesturing for me to enter.

“I’ll have to escort you to the Arch Fathyr,” he said as I passed.

I nodded.

The Skye Hall was at the top of an obscene number of steps, and by the end I probably stank even worse. Yet even that long climb didn’t steal my breath as much as the view of the Skye Hall itself. To call it vast would be an injustice. Fifty yards long, and just as wide and high. Enormous windows made of thousands upon thousands of colored crystals, all fused together, somehow caught the outside light and threw it around the room in different directions and colors. Through the jagged panes I could just make out the river Ty, arcing its way through the fjords. I trembled a tad as I thought of Nobody’s drowned body floating off to sea. I stiffened my jaw and shook off the ghostly shiver prickling my shoulders.

The room twinkled as the Chrystengard led me toward the dais at the end, where sat the Arch Fathyr, the highest Minister for the Chryst Followers on all the Earth, and my contact. He was surprisingly handsome, a man of middling years with a well-groomed beard and piercing green eyes that seemed cut from same crystals that adorned his office. Pale, slender fingers spread out from his opulent purple-and-gold chasuble, whose threads caught the light, making him appear more than a man, closer to the Sky Kingdom. But I knew his heart beat just as any man’s did. At either side of him stood another couple of the preposterous Chrystengard, their halberds criss-crossed against their breasts. A small part of me wanted to see how good these skinny, clean-shaven boys really were, but I pushed it down.

The Arch Fathyr looked at me with a smile that seemed disingenuous, somehow. “So. You’re our man. Our Black Blade.” He inspected me with those keen eyes, and it seemed he was examining my soul for its indiscretions. If he was, I hoped for his sake he hadn’t made dinner arrangements.

I simply nodded. Best to say as little as possible. He was paying the price to the Black Blades, and whatever assassination he assigned me would enable me to complete my induction into that ancient order.

“You stink like fishes,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “And shit.”

“I had to take to the river, Fathyr.”

“Why?”

“I..” I cleared my throat. “I lost my travelling companion.”

The man sat back, looking displeased. “I thought the Blades worked alone.”

“That’s correct, Arch Fathyr. It was a child I was travelling with.”

The confusion melted from his face, and he laughed, tapping the arms of his chair in apparent delight. “Oh, I see. Why didn’t you say? Do not be saddened. Boy or girl? I have people you can speak to about that. I know the Blades do not take individual payment, but I am sure there are other perks you may enjoy.”

I clenched my teeth at that. I didn’t think I’d care about the loss of a child I never knew, but it pawed at the raw hole where she’d been. She deserved better than to be leched over in death by this corrupt philanderer. My fingers twitched to feel my knife, but I mastered myself. It’s a poor Blade who can’t master his emotions, no matter how repulsive the person opposite him.

“Payment to the Black Blades is all that is required, Arch Fathyr,” I said through gritted teeth, lowering my gaze, not so much through deference as disgust. “What is the name of the one whom you would have the Black Blades erase?”

“One of our own. A Fathyr who has deserted the flock. Teaching no longer the wisdom of the true God, but heresy and other wicked, tricky prestidigitations. By himself, no great danger, but the simple folk are taken in by his sorcery and fair words. It would be for the good of the Kingdom of Men, were he to be erased.”

I nodded in apparent acceptance. A wayward Fathyr. Whatever next: a bear shitting in the woods?

“Why not simply have him sent to trial, if he is such a dangerous heretic?”

“Do Blades always ask questions of their marks?” he said, sitting forward with a sneer before regaining his calm and relaxing again. “Imbeciles are often inspired by martyrs. Better to

shatter the illusion by having him slaughtered like a dog, rather than have his soul carried to the Chryst through the ritual of burning.”

That did make a sort of perverse sense. “Indeed. His name, Arch Fathyr?”

“He has many names. Our sources tell us he is living under the name of Heigl, in a village called Skoom.”

“I know Skoom. I will be there as soon as I can.”

“Good. Then begone, if you’ve no other interest in what I have to offer.”

When I was younger, it would have seemed a ridiculous notion to send for a legendary assassin such as a Black Blade to dispose of a wayward and most likely drunken Fathyr who’d lost his faith in the Chryst and its teachings. A gang of thugs outside a tavern would do just as good a job, I always thought. Or would render the target just as dead, in any case. But when you move in the lofty circles of certain men, you learn that there’s prestige at play. Anyone can hire a gaggle of hooligans armed with rusty knives and clubs, but when someone’s been killed by the Black Blades, it sends a message. A message that resonates as profoundly as the flashes of light in the Skye Hall. Braggarts and amateurs can’t help but boast about their brutality; a Blade in the night is swift, and then gone.

Encouraged by the thought of completing my first kill and becoming a blooded member of the Blades, I took my leave of the odious man.

#

Skoom didn’t so much glow in the even light as hum in it. Grotty little houses sprouted up like cancers, while the road running through the town was a trench of boggy piss. It always made me grimly laugh that less than a day’s hard walking from the magnificence of the Chrysthall was a down-on-its-luck, poverty-ridden hole like this. Didn’t seem right to me, anyway. People scratching a living off skin-and-bone goats and scrubby little herb and root vegetable gardens while the spire of the Chrysthall poked defiantly and rudely above the hills in the distance. Ah, well. I never knew much about how such things work. And besides, there’s always a way out of the filth. But it takes a gut full of wit and sweat to actually do it, and by the looks of this lot, all

piggy eyes, pot bellies and open mouths, I didn't reckon they had it. You never miss what you never have, as they say.

A quick drink, a word and an eavesdrop at a local dungheap posing as a tavern revealed the whereabouts of this Fathyr Heigl: a little standalone shack just south of the main huddle of the village.

I waited until darkness fell before I approached the shack. A muddy path overgrown with weeds led there from the village, but I stuck to the trunks of the willows mourning by the edge of the town, slipping from shadow to shadow like silk.

A crude lock fastened the door. My fingers, nimble and artful, silently unclasped it. Training to be a Blade doesn't just involve slitting throats, you know. After removing my boots, I padded inside on soft toes, pressing noiselessly against the rough floorboards. I waited a few moments in the shadow by the front door, surveying the room. Empty, save for a single wooden chair, a few shelves decorated with phials of indeterminate liquid, jars, and other little trinkets: cutlery, a few sheaves of paper, bells, quills, bowls, feathers, and other mundane things, all covered in a thick layer of dust. It didn't look like the haven of a dangerous firebrand. Through the far doorway I crept, into a windowless bedroom. I narrowed my eyes to make out the shapes in the gloom. A bed, a stool, a small looking-glass hanging on the wall.

A man.

Half covered by his bedsheets, he snored merrily. Old fellow. The whiskers of his beard scratched against the bed. Too easy, even for a first assignment. At least I could end his life without his knowing. Even an assassin is acquainted with mercy.

Knife in hand, I pulled the bedsheets back to expose his throat, and gasped.

I squinted, then blinked, trying to convince myself I was wrong. But there was no mistake.

Brothyr Leigh.

The man who'd rescued me as a child and turned me onto a better path. The man who'd told me to keep a warm heart in a cold world. And the man who'd been set upon by maddened bastards and killed over nothing.

Hadn't he?

I stumbled, a floorboard creaked beneath me, and Brothyr Leigh's eyes flickered open. He looked at me, incomprehension writ upon his face. The knife froze in my hand. I brought it up

a few inches, but couldn't bring it any closer. He blinked and scrambled back in his bed, pulling his knees to his chest, quivering when he spied the weapon.

“Wha—”

I shushed him before he could finish, and lit the candle by his bed so we could both see each other better. I'd not seen him in twenty years. He was an old man now: his beard, once soft and grey, was now wiry and white; wrinkly skin wobbled on spindly limbs. But his eyes were as sharp as they ever were, and they pierced me now more keenly than any knife.

I couldn't help myself. “You should be dead,” I said, stuttering.

He rubbed his eyes and squinted. “Who are you?”

I pulled the mask down, and his eyes widened and his mouth sagged open. “Tarqvist... is that you?”

“Yes, Brothyr Leigh. It's me.”

He saw the knife in my hand. I tried to hide it, but it was too late. “What's this? Have you come to kill me, Tarqvist?”

“No, no...” I knelt by the bed and placed my hands on his knees. “Brothyr Leigh. I thought you were dead. Those thieves, in Malagath...”

He flicked his eyes from side to side, probably thinking this was some trick. “Malagath?” he said. “Yes, yes, I remember. I got away, lad. They were bickering, and I slipped away.” He looked me up and down with suspicious eyes. He must have decided I wasn't going to kill him, for he reached forward and touched my face. His hands were rough and callused. There were a thousand things I wanted to tell him: what I'd done with my life, how I'd struggled without him — but I couldn't.

I leaned in close and gripped his arm. “You have to get away,” I said. “There are people who want you dead.”

He frowned at me. “Who?”

I sighed and stared at my knees, as if perhaps the solution to this impasse would be found there. “The Arch Fathyr.”

“The Arch Fathyr? That wicked devil?” He shook his head distastefully. “And are you the person they chose to do it?”

“Yes. No. If I’d known it was you...” I pulled my hand back, and rolled up my right sleeve, revealing the two-hander sword wreathed in smoke. His face contorted in shock.

“The Black Blades? You’re a Black Blade?”

I nodded, a little sheepishly, and he sighed. “After all I taught you. Did I not find you on the cusp of murder, as a boy? And so there you have returned. What happened to you, Tarqvist?”

It’s a strange thing, to find yourself a grown man, a trained killer, a merciless combatant, yet paralyzed with embarrassment at a few stern words from an elderly teacher. “You don’t know what it was like,” I grumbled, knowing it to be completely untrue. He knew just what it was like. “You need to go,” I muttered.

“Go where?”

“How should I know? Just go!” I pulled the bedsheets off him, ushering him into movement. “You don’t want these people after you.”

Put out, he nonetheless pulled on his breeches, an overshirt and some grotty old sandals. When he was dressed, he touched me on the arm, where the inked sword was. His touch itched. “Thank you for sparing me. You still have a warm heart.”

I pulled away and averted my gaze. “Bah,” I mumbled, pulling my sleeve down.

His muffled footsteps left the room and faded into silence. When I turned, he was gone. My heart fluttered and a hard kernel pushed at my throat. My first assignment as a Blade, and I’d fucked it. Shit. I breathed out, rubbing my face to compose myself. “Not a problem,” I whispered to myself. “He was never here. Fled town.”

I swallowed the piss-poor conviction in my excuses, and padded my way out of his bedroom, through the rickety front room, to the front door.

As I ducked through the lintel of the front door, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Just beyond the porch stood Brothyr Leigh facing me, with somebody standing behind him, one arm clasped around his neck, holding him in check, pressing a wicked-looking blade to his throat. The old man looked at me imploringly, eyes wide, skin white. When the moon slipped out from behind an indigo smudge of cloud and threw down a shaft of light on us, I gasped.

Not somebody.

Nobody.

“Tarqvist,” called Brothyr Leigh in a weak voice, but Nobody simply pulled her arm tighter around his neck. The old man struggled, but her grip was far stronger than her slip of a girl’s body should have allowed.

My hand instinctively dropped to where my knife was concealed, but Nobody tutted.

“No, no, no, Tarqvist,” she said. “No time. He’ll be dead before your weapon’s in your hand.”

I growled, knowing she was right. To think I’d actually tried to help the little bitch. The muscles in my jaw twitched, and my eyes narrowed. If she did plan on killing Brothyr Leigh, I’d make sure she was next. “What the hell are you doing, girl?”

“I’m no girl.” Still grasping Brothyr Leigh, she pulled up her other sleeve. It was difficult to see in the dark, but the ink on her forearm was unmistakable. A trio of swords: the two-hander, the dagger, and the curved blade, all wreathed in smoke that churned and moved across her skin, overseen by two disembodied eyes. My guts turned to water.

My voice was paper-thin. “No.” I shook my head, trying to fling away what my eyes were telling me. “You can’t be.” But the ink didn’t lie. “You’re the Black Eye? The head of the Black Blades?”

She nodded.

“But you’re just a girl,” I said, stupidly.

“And you’re just a failure,” she said. “You are not fit to be a Blade. When you thought I was nobody, you told me your name. You revealed your ink. You told me everything about you. You tried to rescue me when I fell into the river. And you let your very first mark go. You are a poor assassin, Tarqvist.”

Brothyr Leigh smiled. “That’s right!” the old man wheezed. “That’s my lad. He has a warm heart in him, that one. Your cold butchery could never change that.”

“Anyone can make a leap if they believe they can. Your pretty boy never believed he could.” Nobody whipped the blade across Brothyr Leigh’s throat, opening it up. Warm blood spattered my face, and his eyes bulged for a second before he slumped forward, bleeding out in the patchy grass.

“A mark never escapes the Blades,” said Nobody, flicking the blood from her knife onto the ground, where it landed with a patter. “And neither do traitors.”

Far too late, the rage boiled in me. I roared. Teeth bared, face clenched into a snarl, I whipped out two knives and lunged forward, slicing the air. I stumbled, catching only thin air where I expected Nobody to be. I spun around to find her behind me and arced my blades through the air, left to right, low to high, grunting with the effort. The sweat dripped off my brow as I slashed indiscriminately. Nobody backed away, ducking and weaving from the blows, until she spun on the spot and disappeared.

Left panting and confused, I blinked at the spot where she had been, then a sharp blow to the small of the back knocked the wind from me and sent me sprawling into a heap on the floor. I rolled over onto my back and elbows to try and shuffle away, but Nobody was already on top of me, straddling my chest, the tip of her blade pointing straight at my face. She'd hardly broken sweat, and looked at me with a twinge of disappointment.

“You were talented,” she said. “But you'll never be a Blade. This world requires a heart of steel. You're simply too weak.”

I tried to shake her off, but she had devilish strength in her arms and legs, and she pinned down my arms with her knees. I realized it was useless to resist her. “Please,” I said, weakly.

She cocked her head to one side, and gave me a little smile, before pinning my right arm down and bringing her blade down upon it.

I'm a hard man, and a big man. A man who's had more than his share of bruises, aches and pains. But I don't mind saying that I screamed like a stuck pig as she sliced and peeled away the inked part of my skin. My body convulsed, my arm burned as though doused in hot fat, and I bit down on my tongue so hard my mouth quickly bubbled with blood.

I tried to scream, “Stop, stop!” but the words came out as a mangled, animal screech. Flailing with my free arm, I landed impotent blows on her back, which she barely registered. My whole body shook with the pain, as though hot needles were being shoved all the way along the insides of my bones, until she pulled the last bit of skin off and held it up to the moonlight. It might have been the pain making me see things, but I swore the skin wriggled this way and that in her grasp, and the ink seemed to melt away from it. At last she tossed the bloody flap away into the grass. I tried to speak, but could only make shallow, childish breath noises as she

turned her gaze to me. She grasped my head with both hands and banged it against the ground, turning the world black.

#

A yelp, and the rustle of something in the long grass a few yards away, woke me. Instinctively, my right hand went to my left sleeve to pull my knife out, but found neither sleeve nor a weapon. Not only that, but the movement made my arm blaze with fresh agony. Blinking in the breaking dawn, I tried to focus on my arm. Red-raw, bleeding and black like a badly cut joint of meat, it was still caked in drying blood and blades of grass that stung like razors. Clenching my teeth, I couldn't help but let out a hoarse cry as I touched the springy, puffy flesh and brought my arm in to my chest.

Next came the nausea as I struggled to sit up. My gut knotted itself into a cramp and I had to swallow the taste of bile in my throat.

Another yelping sound and then the sound of something — someone? — being thumped came from... I turned around gingerly. From somewhere. I hauled myself up to my feet using my good arm, and swiveled inelegantly to get my bearings.

I was still outside Brothyr Leigh's grotty shack, but there was no Brothyr Leigh. No pool of blood. How long had I lain here? Nobody — the Black Eye — had left me to die.

Or perhaps she'd left me to live? Why?

My stomach growled as I walked back to my food bag in the long grass. I needed something to drink and eat to keep from fainting. The hot, dry tang of iron and earthy splinters of grass still soiled my mouth, and though I tried to spit, I found myself hoarse.

When I waded into the long grass by the willows and sycamores, using my good arm to push the grass out of the way, I found the source of the commotion, a few yards hence.

Two boys wrestled quite aggressively by my food bag. A short, piggy boy, and a wiry, grim-looking stick-boy, scrapping with one another. Both greasy-looking things, with callused, wounded fingers and dirty faces, as though they'd both crawled through cow shit to get here.

I tried calling out to them, but my voice was a flaky husk, and trying to clear my throat was hopeless. The thin one rolled on top of the fat one and punched him in the face quite

ferociously. The fat boy's belly jiggled as he tried to writhe out of the attack, hitching his rotten shirt farther up his chest. How the poor could often be so bloody fat, I could never fathom.

"It's my food, fatty!" cried Thin Boy.

"I... found it... first," cried Fat Boy through tears and jagged breaths.

"You don't need it as much as I do, piggy piggy piggy!" Thin Boy punched the fat boy on the nose, and he squealed.

I hung back for a second, half to see how the tussle played out, and half because I had nary the strength to tackle two lads with one bad arm and a head full of nausea.

Thin Boy then pulled a knife — *my* knife — from somewhere, and was about to plunge it into Fat Boy's neck, when I leaped forward and grabbed his wrist with my bad hand. I roared with the pain, but held firm. Both boys looked at me, the rage and aggression instantly turning to fear and the embarrassment of being caught by a grown-up.

I clenched Thin Boy's wrist harder until he squirmed, moaned with pain and dropped the knife. I let go with no small relief, allowing the vicious throb pulsing through my arm to abate. I ignored the rising bile in my gut, swallowed the urge to puke from the agony and wretchedness of it all.

"You were going to kill him," I said, between labored breaths. "Over some dried beef and a flask of wine. *My* dried beef and wine."

Thin Boy screwed up his face and started to cry. Fat Boy took the chance to push him over, sit up and sob himself.

"I needed to eat," said Thin Boy.

"I found it first," sobbed Fat Boy.

I nodded at the both of them. What a sorry threesome we must have looked. "You can't go round killing people," I said, with as much authority as I could muster. "There's enough here for the three of us."

I sat down with some effort and shared out the modest bounty.

"You got family, you boys?"

They both shook their heads. Poor little bastards.

In sorry silence, we sat and consumed our meager meal, and I thought about poor old Brothyr Leigh, and realized that the girl Nobody — or the Black Eye, or whoever she'd been —

had been wrong. I hadn't been weak for sparing Brothyr Leigh's life. I'd been strong. A weaker man might have choked back a tear or two then. But not me. I let them come.

"It's a harsh world, boys," I said, my voice a tad stronger after I'd managed a few mouthfuls of the precious sustenance. "A cold, harsh world. And that makes it all the more important that you keep a warm heart. Don't let yourselves turn to steel."

But they weren't listening. They were too busy stuffing their faces with old meat and wine. Bloody children.

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