



**F**inally standing before the front entrance to the Grieving Dog, I couldn't quite make myself take the final steps inside. I thought about circling the building once or twice to build up courage, but that seemed ridiculous. Still, I stood there, berating myself for not moving. It wasn't simply fear of reprisal—I doubted my mercy (misguided as it was turning out to be) would cause the captain to do more than give me a verbal lashing, and given his peculiar condition, I might even escape that. Temporarily, at least. After all, he'd been the one holding the crossbow in the Green Sea, not me. It was his decision to spare the Hornman, even if I'd been the one who somehow convinced him. He had to recognize some culpability. Well, maybe not. But either way, it wasn't even imagined wrath that gave me pause. It was the thought that my admission would likely cost me whatever small measure of esteem I'd attained by saving his life at the temple.

The fact that I was overwrought about potentially losing the limited respect of a man who was a scheming manipulator actually irked and emboldened me. I knocked the shit and muck off my boots as best I could, stepped through the front door, and walked up the stairs. I'd made my choice to alert Braylar—however it played out after that was how it played out. There was nothing to be gained by perseverating.

Heading down the hall, I saw Mulldoos and Vendurro standing outside the door to the common quarters. They were close together, foreheads almost touching, and Mulldoos's huge paw was wrapped around the back of Vendurro's neck, holding him there as he spoke quietly to the younger man. I couldn't make out the words, which was all for the best, as the scene was clearly intimate, and a display of affection that I would never have suspected from Mulldoos. I was about to turn around and leave them to it when Vendurro nodded twice, and Mulldoos gave the smaller Sylcoon a hard clap on the back, then turned and noticed me there. Whatever

tenderness was on display was immediately replaced by a scowl.

Mulldoos looked at Vendurro and said, "Tell Cap I'm on it." He started down the narrow hall, limping noticeably, clearly expecting me to make way, which I did without a word. He stopped next to me as I pressed up against a wall, and he moved in closer, and I couldn't help but remember Vendurro doing the same thing when we first met, only he was on horse, and yet Mulldoos on foot was somehow twice as terrifying. "Got a real talent for being where you ought not to, and not being where you should. This a scribbler thing, or is being a burning arrow in the ass just something particular to you?"

The words flew out of my mouth before I had a chance to consider them, "Well, I can't presume to speak for the entire chronicling profession, so I suppose it's just me. Or just you who thinks so." A wrinkle bridged his pale brows as some surprise crossed his face, and then an instant later Mulldoos elbowed me hard just below the sternum. I doubled over, grabbing onto his elbow to hold myself up, which also proved to be a mistake, as he backed up and I fell onto my hands and knees, gasping for breath that was nowhere to be found.

He leaned over and said, "Gless, dead. Lloi, deader. Hew, me, and Cap, injured plenty good. What you got going on right now, that thing filling you with a queer panic, making your eyes water, making you feel like whatever garlicky business you got in your stomach is about to come rushing back up, that ain't nothing at all." He patted the pommel of the big falchion on his hip. "Count yourself lucky, scribbler. Real lucky."

Mulldoos headed down the stairs as I knelt there holding my stomach, hugging myself. Clearly, he knew how to hit a man in just the right spot, because he was right about all of the symptoms, only he neglected to mention the vision going blurry as I nearly passed out before sputtering as I finally felt my lungs start working again.

I coughed a few times, and suddenly saw a hand in front of my face. For a moment, I feared Mulldoos had returned to deliver some more good luck, but I looked up and saw Vendurro there. He offered his hand again, which I gladly accepted, and he helped me to my feet.

"Seen him do that a time or ten. Been on the receiving end more than twice. No man takes you down harder than Mulldoos. Sharp elbows, he's got. Sharp."

I tried to straighten, felt my stomach muscles spasm, nearly retched, waited until it passed, then tried again. My ribs were on fire from one tip to the next, but Mulldoos had been right about that, too—no lasting damage. “Why. . .” I waited for some more breath to come back into my lungs, and Vendurro waited with me until I could breathe without sputtering. “What did I do. . . why is he so angry with me?”

Vendurro had a small smile, not nearly as big and toothy as I’d come to expect, but a smile nonetheless. “Oh, wouldn’t say it’s specific to you none. Well, no more than most things and people. The lieutenant, if he’s not angry at one thing, he’s angrier at something else. But just now, I’d say it wasn’t so much what you done, but what you didn’t do. You had no armor, you got no training, and yet you come out of that scrape in the skinny trees without much of a scratch to speak of. Now, I heard Hew-spear say you handled yourself better than you had any right to in there, and stood when most would have pissed themselves and run like rabbits.

“But Mulldoos, all he sees is someone that survived that got no real right surviving when those who maybe should have lived just didn’t. Nothing personal, though.”

“Oh, no,” I was finally able to speak without burning in my belly, “nothing personal. He just wishes it was me dead, instead of Tomner, or Gless—”

Vendurro’s smile disappeared again as I stopped myself, but too late. I tried to think of something that might act as a balm, but only stumbled some more, “I’m sorry, Vendurro. I didn’t, that is, I didn’t mean. . .”

He ran a hand through his thick head of hair. “It’s alright, bookmaster. But you hit on the thing square. Cap ain’t the only one that takes losses hard. And I ain’t meaning the battles, neither. We either won that or scrapped to a draw, depending on who’s keeping tally. But the men. Losing the men. That rubs them both raw. I had a few men under me, back when we were a big company, full squad. Few of them, two younger, two older. But we weren’t at war with nobody just then, so only got into a couple skirmishes, not much chance of anybody dying on my watch. So I can’t pretend to know what it’s like for them, not real like. But I’ve seen them, and Hew, too, all three, seen them lose men, and it’s a hard, bitter thing, it is.”

Vendurro let out a long slow breath. “So it’s no kind of personal. Just rankles the lieutenant you lived when men he trained, knew for years,

didn't make it back."

It was difficult to tell if he wanted to say more or wished he'd said nothing at all, so I left him to it, not wanting to interrupt if he truly wanted to go on, not wanting to press him if he didn't. But he wasn't done. Though you would have thought he was the one who'd just been punched in the gut by how halting it came. "I shouldn't tell you to keep your mouth shut with Mulldoos. I mean, it's sound advice and all, but I know you probably won't heed it none anyway, and I didn't much neither. Still don't know when to clamp shut half the time. I got myself in a ton of trouble over the years with my flapping yap. Thing of it is, Gless, he'd get me out of those scrapes when my mouth got to running faster than my brain. Always had my back, he did. Counted on that, which was half the reason I'd let my mouth go on like I did. Now. . ."

He trailed off, and there was an awkward pause that I broke by saying, "Mulldoos, was he. . . that is, when I came up on the landing, it looked like he was talking to you about Glesswik."

Vendurro nodded slowly. "Yup. That he was."

I waited quietly, figuring if he felt comfortable enough to offer more, he would. Vendurro stared off down the hall, past my shoulder, as if he expected Mulldoos to come back and spare him. Or maybe Glesswik. Finally, just when I was about to excuse myself and proceed to Captain Killcoin's room, Vendurro said, "The thing of it is, soldiers lose other soldiers. Part and parcel of the deal. No getting around it or prettying it up. And the Syldoon more than most, on account of us being full timers. Always on campaign, or on patrol, or invading, or repulsing, or some action or other. Not much time to watch the moss grow, if you see what I'm saying.

"So sooner or later—and mostly on the sooner—you see a Towermate or three go down. Just the Syldoon way. You lose your brothers. And there's nothing worse than that, because there's no tighter unit in the known world than a Syldoon Tower. So, it ain't never easy when it happens. But Gless and me. . ." his forehead wrinkled. "You got any brothers?"

I had no siblings that I knew of, though there were likely some out there. But I shook my head.

He smiled again, small and sad. "Shame, that. Man ought to have a brother or two. But us, the Syldoon, the boys in our Tower, we are broth-

ers, no less than those of blood. Maybe more. And Gless and me were the closest. Just never figured on seeing him go down, is all. Never figured on that.” He trailed off, staring down the hallways again.

I felt as if I should put my hand on his shoulder, or offer some condolence or other, but gestures and words both felt hollow, clumsy, even if delivered sincerely. So, hoping to at least lead him away from his grief rather than toward it, I said, “And did whatever Mulldoos say, did it help any?”

Vendurro rubbed the back of his neck, as if remembering Mulldoos’s huge hand there, and his eyes got a touch wetter. “Told me to grieve my grief—weren’t nothing wrong with it—but then put to it in the ground and armor back up, because my other brothers needed me alert. And we were running mighty thin on quality sergeants just now.” He laughed a little, and then, unexpectedly, laughed some more. “Not one for ornate speeches, Mulldoos. But he has the right of it.”

I nearly pointed out it had only been a day, and such a recent wound would need time to close and heal, but I was clearly no soldier, so maybe Mulldoos was correct. With lives in the balance, maybe performing your duties with a grief-stricken heart wasn’t the best idea, or at least the safest. Who was I to suggest he should allow himself a heavy heart?

It made me glad I was no soldier. It seemed a rough, rough world.

I did put my hand on his shoulder then, impulsively, and said, “I can’t pretend to know what it’s like to have a brother, let alone lose one.” And then, pulling my hand away, added lamely, “I’m sorry.”

Vendurro smiled again. “Thanks, Arkamondos. Gless was a mean bastard, and always looking for a way out of a job if he could find it. Figures he’d leave me with double duty.”

I nodded. “You can call me Arki. No one did, before the captain that is, but I’m getting used to it now. And it’s far better than quillmonkey, scribbler, or—” we both said the next in unison, “horsecunt.” And then we laughed together as well.

But like sun obscured by clouds, that merriment left almost as fast. And these clouds seemed thicker and slower to move past than the last bank. Again, I didn’t want to intrude, so waited him out.

After staring at his feet for a minute, Vendurro said, “Told you he was a shit husband too, didn’t I? Hardly there at all, especially the last few

years with us campaigning all over Anjuria. Even before, when we were stationed in Sunwrack, he only seemed to head home long enough to father two brats of his own.”

Vendurro ran his hands through his hair, shifted his weight from one leg to the next, then leaned against the wall, kicking it with his heel when he did. In that one motion, he seemed to lose ten years, but they came back just as suddenly, and brought friends. “Good lass. Leastwise, not bad. Mervulla. Native Thurvacian. Tower Commanders always telling us to settle down with the locals, make nice. Who can say what she saw in the bastard. Womenfolk are queer as cats.”

He pressed his head back into the wood, closed his eyes. “The Syldoon, they’ll provide something. For her, and her young, on account of the marriage at all. And she got some income. They owned some olive orchards, rented the land out to those that worked them. So, seeing as she’s from the capital herself, can’t see her selling. Still collect the rents, most like. So she won’t need the bread line or to turn prostitute. But still.”

“Bread line? Prostitute?”

“Yep. Plenty of widows got no livelihood to call their own, nor chance to make one after a certain age. Lose their men, lose their coin. Only options are charity or selling what wares the gods gave you. Syldoon widows luckier in that respect. We take care of our own.

“Still, whatever she felt for Gless, can’t see her liking the news she’s a fresh widow none. Can’t see nobody liking that news, less they hated a fellow. And he might have been a bastard, but he wasn’t totally wanting for good qualities. On the whole. So can’t see her liking that news much at all.”

“And you. . . you have to deliver it? You have to be the one to tell her?”

“Have to?” He banged his head and looked up at the ceiling. “Nope. Ain’t no have to. But I knew him better than anybody. And she knew me some, too. So it’s got to come from me. The news and the widowcoin. Got to.”

Before I thought about what I was saying, the words came of their own volition. “Would you like me to go with you?”

Vendurro pulled himself slowly off the wall and looked at me. “You’d do that?”

Now that it was out there, I wished I’d thought it through first. I was

sure that would be painfully awkward and. . . just painful. To witness anyway. But there was no recalling it. I nodded and he seemed to think it over before replying. “Can’t ask you to do that. Not to her door. She never met you, she’d know right off something weren’t right.” He suddenly seemed young and small again as he added, “But if you want to head with me most of the way. And wait to down some drinks after. A lot of them. That would be something, that is, if you—”

“Of course. I’ll accompany you as far you like, and I’ll buy the first round or two. Well, provided the captain pays me ahead of time.”

Between the offer and my halfhearted joke, he seemed in slightly better spirits. Before we dwelt on it much longer though, I asked, “Speaking of the captain, is he in his quarters?”

Vendurro replied, “Yup, that he is. Returned a while back. Told me to make sure he was left good and alone. Figure he’s fighting off whatever it is he fights now that Lloi ain’t here to spell him. Plus, he didn’t seem like he was all too pleased about how that parley with the baron played out. Guessing you should give him some time, unless you like dodging pitchers or platters.”

“Well,” I replied, choosing my words carefully, “I can’t say that I do. But there’s something. . . that requires his attention. And I think he’ll thank me for rousing him. Well, after he screams or throws something at my head.”

Vendurro thought about it for a few moments, then fished the key out of his belt pouch. “Better you than me. Hoping you’re right about it being all fire important, though. Getting real thin on company scribes in these parts, too.” He took the last steps toward the door.

I have always been a study of the way people walk. Their posture, stride, the swing of the arms, the tilt of the head, if they are rigid or relaxed, pigeon-toed. Posture and gait can be very telling, saying a lot about what the person has endured, attitude, mood, mobility, quickness. You can usually tell a fresh limp from an old injury that the person has become so accustomed to they hardly notice.

When I met Vendurro, he strode as if each leg was trying to outdo the other in pushing him off the ground, a springy, rambunctious, youthful gait. But now, he walked as if he were twenty years older, hadn’t slept in days, and was wearing lead boots. Which wasn’t surprising, given his loss, but I wondered in time if he would ever fully recover that bounce, or if

someone who met him in a year or two would never have the chance to see him that carefree.

Vendurro unlocked the door and I thanked him as we stepped inside. He sat down on a stool near the door after locking it again, and watched as I took a few steps toward the captain's chamber and then hesitated. Once I told Braylar what I knew, there would be no untelling it. It was tempting to walk to my room instead, or even back out to the Fair, under the pretense that I simply was following Vendurro's advice not to disturb him, but I knew if I did that I might lose the nerve to go through with it at all. So, with a quick look back at Vendurro, who shook his head and mimed ducking quickly, I knocked quietly on the captain's door.

I didn't hear anything. No raspy threats or pejoratives, no stirring at all, really. I rapped on the door again, louder this time, and waited, but still nothing. I looked back at the young sergeant, who only shrugged, and then I tried the door, expecting to find it locked. But it creaked open as I pushed. I poked my head in, ready to pull it back if anything came flying. The interior was dim, heavy curtains mostly blocking out the horn blinds and the last day's sunlight beyond them, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust.

I called out the captain's name, and still hearing nothing, walked inside and pushed the door shut behind me. I saw his form on the bed, lying on his back, and slowly made my way closer. While the room was too dim to make out much, I saw his chest rising and falling slowly. Also that he was holding Bloodsunder with both hands on his stomach, the way a drunk might cradle the empty flask or leather bottle that had done him in.

I called out his name again, and still no response, physical or otherwise. It appeared he had sunk into his depths again, and this time without Lloi to rescue him. I sat down heavily on a bench against the wall, not worried that it scraped loudly when I did. Captain Killcoin didn't stir at all.

In the Green Sea, he said each time was a little different, that it was impossible to gauge his response to the stolen memories that must have been flooding into him now. Perhaps this condition was temporary. I was reluctant to head back to the common room to tell Vendurro—certainly he'd seen his captain laid low like this before, so it wouldn't come as a shock, but I doubted it would be welcome news either.

But from my experience in the steppe, it was unlikely I was going to do



any good sitting there. I had no skills to assist him, and my presence surely wasn't any kind of relief, even if he felt it at all. So I sat there, unsure what to do. I waited for a while, my anxiety growing by the moment, especially as I had little enough to distract myself with. Braylar's room was small enough, and little had changed since we left it earlier in the day. Someone, no doubt a terrified boy or girl, had swept up the mess and removed the remnants of the ale, probably at Vendurro's behest. Besides some chests and clothes on top of them, and the table and chairs near the bed, the only other object in the room was the long container we'd lugged and stowed away for so many days, the same that the captain appeared determined to protect at all costs.

Looking at it, I still wondered at the whole business. Even given the Anjurians' superstitious nature and how much stock they put in ceremony and pomp, it still seemed decidedly peculiar the absence of royal vestments would be alarming enough to cause uproar or upheaval of any kind. Obviously the Syldoon had several schemes in play in this region, and the stolen vestments weren't central to their machinations. Their play on Baron Brune and High Priest Henlester proved that, and for all I knew, other games were being played as well.

But it still struck me as odd that they would go to such lengths to steal and transport something that was peripheral (at best) to their major plans here, especially since I doubted such maneuvering was going to prove all that fruitful, and I'm sure the Syldoon soldiers in their charge must have shared those doubts. The Boy King's reign was off to a rocky start, given that his regent was hardly loved, and there was such contentious blood between the young monarch and so many of his barons, something inherited from the king so recently buried. Perhaps those inclined to be critical could point to the missing trappings and robes as one more sign that the boy wasn't fit to rule, or that his reign would only end in calamity. But while I was hardly an expert on court politics, that still seemed somewhat shaky to me. Even with all the importance attached to the rituals of ascension.

Perhaps you simply had to be Anjurian to appreciate the finer points. Perhaps some missing robes were enough to undermine an already rickety transition of power and title. Who could say?

I'd only read about such a transfer, as old King Xefron had reigned for at least forty years, long enough to outlast the war with the Syldoon and

negotiate a truce, but not long enough to ensure his heir would inherit a stable kingdom or had the prowess and acuity to manage it. Were the robes and whatnot ancient? Surely they wouldn't want a new monarch to appear in public with tattered vestments, yellowed and threadbare. Hardly an inspiring image. But then again, maybe that was part of the ceremony, the cloth that so many ancestors had worn, ugly as it might have been, signifying that a legitimate succession was occurring. But just how old were they? Who had been the first to wear them? They must have been in a vastly different style and cut from the current royal fashion.

Before I'd thought it through, I found myself kneeling before the container, casting a quick look back at Braylar's unmoving form before pulling the canvas back.

A lock. Of course there was a lock. I nearly sat back down on the bench, but my curiosity was fully roused now. While a large part of me knew doing anything else was pure foolishness, I really wanted to see the vestments, just once. I would probably never have another opportunity like this. And I told myself I already knew what was inside, so there was no harm in taking a quick peek at the contents. So I walked over to the clothes, found Braylar's belts and pouches, and picked out the one that I was sure contained the long key.

I was breathing fast as I fit the key into the lock. The tumblers were well oiled, but still clicked loudly enough I worried Vendurro must have heard. But he was doubtless trying to put his grief in the ground, and surely I'd hear voices if anyone else returned.

With the lock undone, I lifted the lid, which was less well oiled, and creaked loudly. Even in the dim light, it took only a moment to realize that there weren't clothes inside at all. Not a one, not a stitch. Instead, there were countless scrolls of various sizes, some large and bound by tiny chains, others smaller and secured by leather cords, or a few with silk ribbons, and there were several cracked leather tubes that I assumed contained still more. Some scrolls had thick wooden rollers on each end, and even those had distinct differences, a few being plain and simple, others with elaborate designs carved into wood that seemed stained various colors. Some scrolls appeared to be papyrus, others thicker parchment that looked so old I feared to even breathe too close lest they crumble into dust. There were clay and waxed tablets in the container as well.

I'd been breathing fast before, but now I stopped altogether. These

looked to have been gathered from a number of places, and spanned the ages. What *was* this?

“I hadn’t realized the Fair was canceled today. Pity.”

I dropped the lip and it slammed shut on my fingers. It was all I could do not to howl in pain.

With his voice unused for hours, it was even more coarse and raspy, but there was no mistaking the fact that Captain Killcoin was indeed awake, and not swept under the currents of stolen memories.

I pulled my fingers clear, stood up, and turned to face him. I felt like a child again, caught by my mother stealing a coin from her small purse. The blood rushed to my face, and I heard my heart pounding in my ears, both from hot embarrassment, fear, and also anger from having been deceived again. “There are no royal vestments.”

Braylar was sitting up in bed and it was difficult to read his expression in that light. How he had moved so quietly, especially without rattling the chains of the flail, was a mystery. He set Bloodsunder on the bed and clapped three times, slowly. “Oh, deftly done, Arki. Truly. Caught literally red-handed—I hope it leaves a deep bruise, by the way—and you have the gall to lay an implied accusation at my feet. Very nice redirection. There might be hope for you yet.”

Shame, fear, and anger coiled tighter. With my voice as controlled as I could make it to mask all three, I asked, “Do you ever tell the truth?”

He laughed then, followed immediately by a cough. “As seldom as I can manage, and only when other recourses are exhausted. Or as it suits my purpose. Which is rare enough, but noteworthy.”

“But why? Why the story about stealing robes? Why did you tell me anything at all?”

Braylar rose slowly, and it was obvious now that his stupor was due to ale, as he teetered just slightly. He must have managed to keep some down without vomiting. “I have a question of my own, more pressing as it happens—where are the flagons? I don’t recall sending them away. Is this your doing, because you will have more to answer for that heinous crime than the transgression of opening a locked box. Oh. Yes. I will take the key back now. Just after you snap the lock shut again.”

I did as he bade and walked toward him slowly, feeling unsteady on my feet as well. Fear seemed the only strand left now.

“Come now, I’m not some brutish Grass Dog to cut off half your hand.

Frankly, I'm so utterly stunned at your initiative of late—or utterly drunk at last, I'm not entirely certain—that I find myself more amused than enraged. But I can't promise how long that shall last." He snapped his finger. "The key."

I handed it to him, happy he let me take my hand and fingers back whole and unbroken.

Braylar said, "As to your query, I wanted to see if word about stolen vestments started circulating, or if you carried the tale yourself to unwholesome ears."

"So it was a test? A trap?"

"Oh, yes. A testy trap."

"You had me followed then?"

"Well, it would not have been much of a test if I couldn't monitor the outcome, now would it?"

I stood there, stunned, wondering if my tail had seen the young Hornman, or my reaction to him, anyway. "And?" I asked, slowly, quietly.

"Well, if you had run to the good baron, you can be sure this conversation would have a much different tenor. I had hoped you would prove yourself leal, and you have. Well, until you broke into my things, that is."

I looked back at the chest, barely trusting my voice. "What are these documents then?"

He dropped the key into his pouch and closed it. "My permissive mood is passing. Leave me. Now. And send in more ale. Immediately."

While I had countless other burning questions, I knew I'd used up as much goodwill as the captain was likely to offer. And while I'd come into the room initially to tell him about the Hornman, that suddenly seemed the worst idea I'd ever come up with.

I turned to go, and Braylar rasped, "Oh, and the next time you filch something from me, young scribe, you can be sure I will batter you to the floor, kick your ribs in, and spit on your wailing face. If I am feeling permissive. And worse if I am not. Are we clear?"

Yes, now was not the time for admissions of any kind. It appeared Mulldoos had been right about this being my lucky day. Without turning around, I nodded and left the captain in his dim chamber as fast as my feet could carry me.