

A North-South Divide

3 Chapter Sample

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Part 1: The North

Chapter 1

It was difficult for Duncan to say what shocked Nadine more – the fact that he had come barging into the Half Moon Inn so late, soaked to the bone, and hardly able to stand, or that the man who was supporting him was the captain of the Watch. In all likelihood, it was that she was hosting an after-hours lock-in and had neglected to bolt the front door. Three men seated around one table looked up from their drinks as the door flew open, but otherwise did not react to the pair's arrival.

Duncan met Nadine's eyes, seeing her initial look of shock turn to one of concern at the sight of the messenger. Duncan tried to mouth an apology but was shaking and shivering too much even for that; Duncan's legs were threatening to drop him to the ground at any moment. The captain of the Watch seemed to sense it too, reaffirming his grip around the man he had carried here from the river, and hauled him more upright.

"Says he knows you," the captain said.

"He does," Nadine said, setting aside the cloth she had been wiping down the counter with and coming around to assist. Together, the two struggled the messenger further into the inn.

"No, not there," Nadine said, as the Watch captain made for the nearest seat. "Over by the fire."

"What happened?" Nadine asked, once they had set Duncan down.

"Found him in the river," the captain said. "Thought he was about to drown. Been this way ever since I pulled him out." The Watch captain considered the shivering messenger again. "Not sure what's wrong with him. He was only able to tell me to bring him here, to you."

"I can take things from here, Pierce," Nadine said.

"You should get him a physician," Pierce started.

"He's fine," Nadine said, "it's the shock, nothing more. I will take care of him. It's not the first time I've seen him like this. You should get back to work."

Pierce considered things for a moment longer, before conceding. "I will want to speak to him

once he's better, so I can find out all the details."

"I'll send him your way," Nadine promised, as Pierce made to leave.

Pierce paused at the front door, looking over the three old men who remained in their seats, sipping their beers and spectating the entire event without even pretending to offer their assistance. He then made his way out, gesturing for the landlady to lock the door this time around.

Nadine did so and then returned to Duncan's side. She tossed more fuel onto the fire.

"Duncan," she said, kneeling down in front of him, "are you all right? What happened to you?" She stoked the fire, to encourage the flames to rise and take the wood.

"Mugged," Duncan finally managed through chattering teeth. "Jumped into the river."

Nadine put a hand on the messenger's forehead, feeling how icy cold his skin was. "I will draw you a hot bath," she said. "Stay here."

"Not going anywhere," Duncan responded.

Duncan remained sitting by the fire as the landlady disappeared, shivering, and willing the flames to grow taller and to warm him quicker. His wet clothes weren't helping matters, but he was not going to strip off here. Despite the encouragement given them by Nadine, the flames remained low in the hearth. It was far from the roaring fire that Duncan needed right now. But at the height of summer, there wasn't much call for such a hearty fireplace.

"Are you all right there, friend?" one of the men seated nearby finally asked.

Duncan nodded.

"You're shaking quite a bit," one of the others observed.

"Just shock," Duncan managed, without turning to them.

"Someone decided to send you on a midnight swim? Didn't try and weigh you down, did they?"

Duncan shook his head and concentrated on the fire, hugging himself, and trying to control his shivering. The pain was the worst part, always was. He could see that his hands were near-porcelain white, the blood having nearly drained from them completely. He didn't need a mirror to

know that his face would look the same. His eyes, too, could well have lost their colour, reduced now to a dull, lifeless grey. The hair on his head may well have followed suit. Pierce had passed no comment, however, so either he had not noticed or the water had not been cold enough to trigger the reaction. He was glad that the three men had not come over to investigate any closer. It would hopefully mean fewer questions later.

Nadine soon returned, striding over to Duncan. "Right, come on. Let's get you into that bath." She hauled the messenger up and led him to the backrooms, where the inn's single bathtub resided. The tub was steaming, hot water having already been poured into it. Nearby, more water was being heated.

"Get undressed and get in," Nadine instructed. Her tone indicated that she didn't have time for arguments.

Duncan fiddled pathetically at his clothes. The numbness of his fingers was preventing him from undoing the buttons of his tunic and the belt of his trousers. After a few moments, Nadine assisted, leaving Duncan to handle his undergarments by himself.

"I'll be back in a moment," Nadine said, picking up the wet clothes Duncan had dropped in a heap on the floor. "I'll put these out to dry and see what clean clothes I have to fit you."

Duncan slipped into the tub with a satisfied groan. The shivering subsided a little, as did the pain, but he knew it would still be some time before the effects wore off and he returned to normal. Despite it being deep and wide enough for him to stretch out in, Duncan sat hunched in the water, arms hugged about himself. It was just more comfortable this way.

He became aware a little while later that Nadine had returned. She was looking him over, seeing the way he was all gathered up. "Is it hot enough?" she asked. She dipped her fingers into the water and withdraw them swiftly as the water scalded them.

"Hot enough," Duncan said.

"That water's not going to do much good with you all curled up like that, though," Nadine said. She took up a bucket that sat next to the tub, scooped up water, and poured it over Duncan's

head. This she repeated several more times, until Duncan warmed enough to be able to stretch out and lie back in the tub.

“Thank you,” he said. He was starting to find it easier to talk again. The pain in his throat was starting to subside.

“I will check back on you in a little while,” Nadine said. “I just need to make sure the three old boys aren’t helping themselves to the barrels.” She then knelt down next to Duncan, cupping the messenger’s face in her hands and looking him in the eyes. “Duncan, I don’t know what happened tonight, but please promise me that you will be more careful. If you aren’t, your secret will out, and ... well.”

Duncan followed Nadine’s eyes to the amulet that hung around his neck.

“Just one more piece to find,” he said.

“And I hope you find it soon.” Nadine rose. “If you need anything, shout.”

Duncan nodded, and Nadine left him to finish his recovery. It was a hot night, so the bath did not cool as fast as it might have otherwise, and soon enough Duncan felt the warmth seep back into his bones. The feeling returned to his fingers, and the colour to his skin. The shivering lessened, as did the pain, and his breathing became easier. A short while later, he was feeling like his old self once again, like a normal man once more.

Or as normal as he could get.

A mirror rested on the floor next to the tub. He picked it up and peered into it, seeing that his eyes had returned to their original deep blue. He sighed and lay back. It had been quite a while since anything this bad had happened to him. He could only hope there wouldn’t be many more. He took hold of the circular amulet about his neck, fingering the three pieces that he had recovered so far and the empty quarter that remained to be found.

“How much longer am I going to have to keep doing this?” he said quietly to himself. Days he wished for, months even. Decades would be testing. Centuries? He would rather die. But the curse wouldn’t let him, and had tormented him for all this time. He closed his hand around the amulet,

concentrating on it, trying to feel even the most subtle of movements. Nothing. The amulet remained as still and quiet as it had in so many summers.

How much longer? With the entire world to search for the last piece, centuries more was a definite possibility.

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Nadine returned a short while later to check on his progress. Once he was ready, she provided him with a towel and a fresh set of clothes to wear while his others dried out. In the summer night air, they would be done by morning. The spares that Nadine brought him were various pieces that had been left behind by past guests of the inn, and were a mixed bag of garments. All were a little too large and hung loose about him, but Duncan did not mind. Nadine had also set aside a room for him in which to stay the night.

“I have no money at the moment, as you probably already guessed,” Duncan said.

“I’ll bill the guild, if necessary. They can sort it out,” Nadine said. “If you’re happy to go back out front to the taproom and sit with the old-timers, I’ll bring you some food,” she added.

“You’re probably hungry.”

“Always am after the event,” Duncan said.

He returned to the taproom, seeing the three old men still gathered around the table. Either Nadine had brought them fresh drinks, or they were nursing the ones they had been enjoying when Duncan first arrived. A group of old men such as these might not have many other places they needed to be right now, and could quite happily drink until the small hours.

“Well, look who’s back in the land of the living,” said one of them.

“The bath helped,” Duncan said, taking a seat at the table with them. The three were quite distinctive in looks. One was squat and wide, sporting a gut to be proud of, good enough to rest one’s beer on, as he was doing now. The man he was sitting beside was the polar opposite, tall and

thin, with long legs that Duncan had kicked as he took his place. The sort with a good appetite for food, Duncan thought, but where it ended up in the man only the gods knew. The last of the three wore a great bushy beard. Straggly, somewhat unkempt, and far more silvery than black, it swallowed most of the man's lower face, his mouth barely visible as he spoke.

The beard extended his hand for Duncan to shake. "The name's Fastbar," he said.

"Duncan," the messenger introduced himself.

"Good to meet you," Fastbar said. "This here is Thomas and Ordo." He indicated the skinny man and the one with the impressive gut. "We're all regulars around here, in case you couldn't quite work out." He grinned, showing several yellowing teeth.

Nadine came over, carrying with her a large steaming bowl. "Lamb stew," she said, placing it in front of Duncan.

Duncan gave his thanks and began eating immediately. He was ravenous, the healing from the cold having left him feeling like he hadn't eaten in days.

"Don't burn yourself now," Fastbar said.

Duncan assured him that he wouldn't, though he doubted his words were in any way understandable through the mouthful of food he was chewing down. There was more risk of him choking right now.

"We'll sort out the bill in the morning," Nadine said.

"Three more beers, Nadine," Thomas said, as the landlady started away.

"I'm not sure about that, Thomas," Nadine said, with a glance at the door. "You saw the look that Pierce gave you just as he left. We're past hours. I think I'm going to want to close up properly soon." She also sounded tired and in want of her bed. The bath that Duncan had made use of had clearly been drawn for her own benefit.

"We've enjoyed plenty of lock-ins in the past," Fastbar said.

"Yes, but that was with Dran, and he's not captain of the Watch any more. I don't know this new guy well enough yet. Experience has taught me to expect changes."

“He’s going to need something to wash that lot down with,” Thomas said, hooking a thumb in Duncan’s direction. “And we can’t have him drinking on his own now, can we? Bit of company for him while you get to your bath.”

Nadine sighed. “Fine, but only another half-hour, then I’m collecting your tankards, no matter how full they are. And I’ll need you to settle up now.”

She held out her hand, and, after mumbling to one another about whose round it was, the thick-bearded Fastbar slapped a number of coins into the landlady’s palm. Four beers were in turn deposited on the table, at which point Nadine declared time for the second time that night and let the group know that she was off to take a bath. She ignored Ordo’s enquiry as to whether or not she wanted someone to scrub her back.

“Saw your Silver Wings earlier,” Fastbar said to Duncan. “You’re a messenger, then?”

“For almost as long as I can remember,” Duncan said. He had already made it through half the bowl of stew. At this rate, he might be asking Nadine for another helping before he turned in.

“You have a bag with you?” Fastbar asked.

“Did have,” Duncan said, returning to his stew.

“The ones who jumped you took it, then?”

“They didn’t take it, no,” Duncan said. “I dropped it in the river.”

“That’ll be lost,” Ordo commented. “Along with all the letters.”

“It’ll still be there.”

“They might’ve gone in after it,” Thomas said.

“They didn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

The three men looked from one to another, but Duncan did not elaborate.

“Well, even if it’s still there, all the messages will be ruined,” Thomas said.

Duncan passed no comment. He knew that the bag, along with its contents, would be all right

once it was retrieved.

“Where have you come from?” Fastbar asked Duncan.

“I just came down from Farfix. Before that, I was working out in Palemoon and the Four Valleys.” Duncan took a swallow of his beer. It was too cold right now and chaffed his throat as it went down. He would need it to warm up.

“Heard slavers have been busy over that way recently,” Thomas commented. “From what I understand, they’ve been hitting the hamlets and more isolated, out-of-the-way settlements. Some of the places are being razed to the ground. They’re loading everyone up and taking them away, save for the older ones and the children, the sort they know wouldn’t fetch any price at all.”

Fastbar tutted and shook his head. “The earls are still doing nothing about it?”

Thomas snorted. “Too busy making plans to take the throne to bother with allocating men to protect us.”

Duncan concentrated on eating as the three men talked politics. The stew had been exactly what he needed. There had been a generous amount of meat in the bowl, something he was sure Nadine had paid attention to when she had served it up. The chunks of lamb were succulent and juicy, and there was a good mix of potatoes and other vegetables to be found, all cooked just right. Whoever Nadine’s cook was certainly knew their way around a pot and a kitchen.

“Wasn’t like that in my grandfather’s day,” Fastbar was saying. “The world was different then, he always told us. There were things to be afraid of, monsters and the like. They’re all gone now.”

“Your granddad was always one for his stories,” Thomas said. He sounded like he didn’t believe a word Fastbar was saying.

“Time was once when you would need to keep a sword handy to defend yourself against more than just a handful of bandits.”

Thomas opened his mouth to refute the claim.

“But the world’s changing,” Fastbar went on. “All those things are gone now. You don’t see

any elves any more, do you?"

"No," Thomas admitted. "That you don't."

"Their homes are all abandoned. It's like one day they all got up and left."

"Speaking of missing things," Thomas said, turning to Duncan, "you haven't happened to have come across or heard word about our long-absent royal family on your travels, have you?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Duncan said.

"You know where I think he is?" Fastbar said. "He's gone to the Forbidden City, to sort the problem out for himself. You been over that way recently at all?" he asked of Duncan.

Duncan confirmed that he had.

"Still covered in fog?"

"Still covered in fog," Duncan said. He finished the last of his stew and pushed the bowl away. He was still a little hungry but was satisfied that it could wait until morning. For now, he would content himself with the remainder of his beer.

"How close did you get to Evermore?" Thomas asked.

"Not very," Duncan said. "I don't really like getting within a mile of the place. And even that's a bit too close for comfort." He recalled the last time he had seen the so-called Forbidden City, not a few weeks earlier. Thick white fog lay low around the city limits, like a cloud that had settled down to rest. The wisps barely moved, and it was deadly silent all around. Even the wildlife knew to steer clear of it. Evermore had been its name once upon a time. Now, most knew it simply as the Forbidden City.

"Can't say I blame you," Thomas said. "You couldn't pay me enough to even step foot in the same hold. Do you really think that's where the king has gone?" he asked Fastbar.

The bearded man considered it for a moment, scratching at his cheek. "One part of me wants to say no, but the other wouldn't be surprised. He was never one to sit on his arse and tell others what to do. Always wanted a piece of the action and glory for himself."

"And the best of luck to him," Thomas said. "If he has gone there, that's the last we'll ever

see of him. People go in, but not a one ever comes out.” The tall man took a small sip of beer. By Duncan’s estimation, he had barely drunk any of it.

“Think he’s taken the queen and his son with him?” Thomas then wanted to know.

“Yep,” Fastbar said, taking a long pull from his tankard. “Only reasonable explanation why they all vanished at the same time. Suppose it won’t be long now until Seti makes its move against us.”

“How so?” Thomas asked.

“With the king gone and the earls making ready to fight among themselves for the right to the throne, the emperor of Seti will realise we’ve taken our eye off the ball and decide it’s time to send that new army of his our way.”

Thomas turned his attention Duncan’s way, apparently seeking further input on what the other man was saying.

“It’s said that Emperor Leo has been building a new army,” Duncan said, “in readiness to attack Akidos, as well as the Southern Isles.” The messenger didn’t believe it himself. If it were true, Leo would have mentioned it in one of his letters to Duncan already. Duncan added, “From what I understand, the Setians have spent a lot of time and effort in developing a powerful new weapon.”

“What kind of weapon?” Thomas asked.

“One that can hurl a ball of iron heavier than a rock through the air, with greater speed and accuracy than any siege weapon ever conceived,” Fastbar said. “And these weapons are *small*. You could fit dozens of them onto one ship. And that boy emperor is said to be building a lot of ships.”

“But why?” Thomas wanted to know.

“Lust for power and control,” Fastbar said. “Also, Leo’s said to have something wrong in his head that makes things like learning difficult for him.” He tapped his temple. “Been that way since birth. Has probably made him crazy, too.”

Thomas didn’t look thrilled by the news, and finally took a longer pull on his tankard.

“If it’s to be believed, that is,” Fastbar said. “You know how rumours have a habit of becoming more and more exaggerated as they pass from one ear to the next. So, Messenger Duncan, where you off to tomorrow?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Time, lads,” Nadine’s voice then came, as the landlady reappeared, washed and dressed down.

Fastbar groaned. “You bath fast, lass.”

Duncan saw Nadine’s eyes on him, and concluded that she had done so out of worry for the messenger. She need not have done so.

“Just another half-hour,” Thomas pleaded. He lifted his tankard to drink, a little too fast, beer slopping over the side and onto the table.

Snoring then came from Duncan’s right, and the messenger saw that Ordo was fast asleep, his great gut rising and falling steadily with each intake of breath. It did not appear that he had taken one sip from the tankard that Nadine had brought him earlier.

“Definitely time,” Nadine finished, scooping up the tankards and bowl, amid protests from Fastbar and Thomas. Defeated, Thomas and Fastbar shook, prodded, and poked at Ordo until he was awake enough to stand on his own, and started for the exit.

“Wrong door,” Nadine said, arms folded across her chest.

“Right you are,” Fastbar said, turning around and making for the rear entrance that led into the alley behind the inn, one which would make it less obvious that the three had been drinking after hours.

“Same time tomorrow, Nadine,” Fastbar said. He shut the back door behind him before the landlady could answer.

“I can hardly wait,” Nadine said, locking up after the three. She let out a long sigh, which was quick to turn into a yawn, and rubbed at her eyes. “I’m calling it a night,” she said to Duncan. “Do you need anything?”

“I’ll be fine,” Duncan said.

“All right,” Nadine said. “We’ve one of those rare nights where we’ve no guests staying, so feel free to knock about for a bit, if you like.”

“Thanks again for everything.”

“Anything for you.” She gave him a peck on the cheek, and then ascended the stairs to her rooms.

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Duncan followed suit soon after, stepping into the small bedroom that Nadine had set aside for him. It was sparse, containing just a bed and a small dresser, and an equally small window. Without any possessions to hand, not even the clothes he was wearing his own, it suited his needs.

Now that he thought about it, where *was* his bag? His three drinking companions had sparked the question in his mind. He was quite certain he had unhitched it when he had hit the water, to stop it acting like an anchor and weighing him down. Had it been stolen, it would have returned itself to him by now. In such a case, he would have expected to find it here, on the bed, as he had entered the room. This wasn’t the first time he had been separated from it, and its absence wasn’t of great concern right now. He was certain he would find out what had happened to it tomorrow, when he returned to the scene of the attack.

He ran over the rules for the bag as outlined by Shane as he prepared to settle down to sleep. The bag could never be stolen or otherwise taken away without due consent, and would always return to the rightful owner, at a time and place that was convenient to them. The same applied if the bag was lost, whether it be because the owner forgot to bring it with them, it fell overboard a ship during rough seas, or even disappeared down into the depths of the deepest, darkest abyss. The bag would return, each and every time, contents and all fully intact.

The only way for the bag to stop following its owner around was for the owner to gift it to another. This had to be done willingly, as Shane had done with Duncan. Attempting to gain

ownership by means of trickery or duress would not work. The gifting had to be genuine – it had to come from the heart.

Duncan was certain that was the reason that the bag was not here with him. He had intentionally let go of it in the river, to allow him to escape the crushing, dreadful cold of the rushing waters. It would still be there now, settled on the bottom, waiting for him to come and collect it.

But there was also the chance it *had* been stolen, or swept away by the current. It could be as Fastbar had said – the world was changing, becoming something new, something quite unrecognisable from how Duncan remembered it. It was a gradual change, going unnoticed by many. But not Duncan. Why it was happening, he did not know, and neither could he say whether it was for better or worse.

But these were questions for another time. He lay down on the bed, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

Chapter 2

Duncan thanked Nadine again the next morning for her kindness and generosity, and promised to repay her the moment he had retrieved his possessions. In response, Nadine handed Duncan a small bag of coins, just in case he needed them. With that, he departed the inn and made his way out into Treatwell's early morning.

Though mid-summer, Duncan felt a chill, as he always did in these latitudes while the sun was not yet at its apex. His clothes had mostly dried overnight, only a scant few damp patches remaining. He pulled down his sleeves and buttoned up his overcoat to maintain a comfortable warmth as he made his way towards the bridge where he had been ambushed and thrown off.

He considered the event as he walked. He had done the same last night as the captain of the Watch had assisted him in reaching the Half Moon Inn, and had ruled out a random assault. His attackers (two men, of shorter than average height for the region, hooded, cloaked, and armed with a pair of daggers each) had targeted him specifically. They had asked for no money, had not asked him to turn over anything he was carrying. They had come at him with purpose, the whole assault premeditated.

They had struck as he crossed that bridge, approaching from either end. Duncan's attempt at bargaining had fallen upon deaf ears, and though the messenger was adept in a number of close-quarters defensive arts, the advantage had been all theirs. The knives had come fast and unexpected from where they had been hitched at their backs, and the dark fabric of their loose clothing had allowed them to blend in with the dark of the night, masking their forms and making them difficult targets to strike.

Multiple stab wounds had followed, as had a slit throat, before Duncan had been hurled over the side of the bridge. He had allowed the waters to carry him downriver as far as one of the town gates before he struggled to shore, shivering in agony from the cold. The sound of him entering the water had not gone unnoticed, and he could only be thankful that by the time the captain of the

Watch had found him, he had stopped bleeding and his wounds had healed.

But why had he been attacked? To his mind, he had not crossed anyone of standing, and, to the best of his knowledge, there was no price on his head. He owed no money (far from it), and was certain he had no enemies, other than the few he sometimes upset when he bested them at a game of Plex. Whoever his attackers were, they (or the person who had hired them) would soon learn that he was not dead and would come after him again.

But first things first. He had now come to the bridge where the assault had taken place. It was a nice-looking bridge, he thought, wooden and arched, with ornate red railings and black posts at either end. He crossed to the middle, where he had been when he was jumped, briefly considering the immediate area. Though there had been no rainfall that night, there was no sign of blood. It would have dried and dissipated in a matter of moments, leaving no stain or trace of its existence. It was but another of the effects the curse had upon him. He mused that this fact might have pleased his attackers. There would be no signs of assault, and it would have been as if their target had simply vanished. But, of course, they knew nothing of the effects of the curse. Had they done so, they would not have attempted to kill Duncan in the first place, knowing it to be a futile effort.

Duncan leaned over the railing. The river the bridge crossed lay fifteen feet below, the waters flowing at a steady pace. It was deep, around ten or eleven feet from the surface to the bed, but also very clear, allowing him to see the bottom with ease. And there, resting on the river bed as he had expected, was his bag. The current and depth made it show up as a red smudge, but there was no disguising it from Duncan. He was a little surprised that no one had made an attempt to fish it out. Perhaps it was too early in the day, or maybe no one had noticed it yet. Then again, Duncan thought, it was perfectly possible that they had made an attempt to retrieve it, but the bag had obediently returned itself to the bottom of the river, where Duncan had left it.

He now had to find a way of getting it out. He was a strong swimmer, having had many, many summers to practise, but he already knew that even during the day, the water would be colder than he was able to tolerate; he wasn't keen on jumping in and suffering a repeat of the previous night's

events. He might be able to hook it with a pole from the bankside, but that risked piercing and rupturing the bag. The bag would repair itself in time, but in the meanwhile the contents would spill out. Or worse, become lost for good.

There was, however, another option. He turned his attention to the group of youths he had passed in coming here. They were still gathered in their circle, some standing, a few on their haunches, others on their knees. They were shouting and gesticulating wildly, fists clenched, pointing into the centre of their gathering, jeering and egging on that which they surrounded.

“Hit him!” shouted one.

“Come on, get stuck in! You had him earlier!” another cried.

“Stop defending and get him!”

“You better not lose, Marco. I want some *Frozen Fruits* from Vince’s!”

“I want some, too. You best be sharing!”

“Get around the back! Get him, you bloody coward!”

“That’s it!”

“Kick him! Kick him!”

To the casual observer, it might appear that the boys were cheering on a fight between two others. Duncan knew better. With no combatants in sight, not even the thrashing of limbs as the pair tussled on the ground, it was plain that the boys were playing a game of Battle Lords. Two of the magical inch-high warriors would be engaged in a fight to the death (or as far as the game allowed), the boys cheering on their chosen side. By the sound of it, a wager was in place, Duncan guessing that the loser would have to either part with money or forfeit by buying the winner an assortment of treats from Vince’s sweet shop.

It seemed the battle had been going on for a little longer than some had the patience for, a few of the boys starting to look elsewhere for distraction as they awaited the outcome. One met Duncan’s eye, and the messenger beckoned him over.

“What?” the boy asked, joining Duncan on the bridge.

“Battle going well?” Duncan asked.

The boy shrugged. “Taking too long. Won’t be getting any *Fruits* before sunset at this rate.”

“I think I can help you there. Want to earn some coin?”

The boy observed him with mild suspicion. “Depends. I ain’t doing nothing weird.”

Duncan chuckled. “You see that down there.” He indicated the rippling red smear that was his bag in the river.

The boy leaned over the railing. “Yeah?”

“That’s my bag. I dropped it last night. Had too much to drink, you see.” He mimed taking two swigs from a tankard. He then tapped his Silver Wings. “I’m a messenger, and my boss will be pretty pissed off if I don’t deliver the mail. I’ll pay you to fetch it for me.”

“Why can’t you do it?” the boy asked, looking Duncan up and down. “Can’t swim? Or don’t want to get them fancy clothes of yours wet?”

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other.” Duncan shrugged. He then retrieved the small purse that Nadine had given him and removed one of the coins. “I’ll give you this as a reward.”

The silver was a lot to pay for the task, as Duncan full well knew. The boy did too, the size his eyes had grown a testament to the fact. The boy moved to take the coin, but Duncan folded his hand around it.

“Yours when you bring that up,” Duncan said, gesturing again to his bag. “You a good swimmer?”

“The best,” the youth declared. Already, his clothes were coming off, the boy stripping down to his undergarments, in preparation to dive into the river. The lad’s confidence in this did not surprise Duncan. It was common for youths to jump off bridges such as this. Often for fun, sometimes as a way of keeping cool in the summer, and also as a rite of passage as they grew older. It could be unnerving for some to make the leap for the first time. A broken leg from leaping into shallower waters was not uncommon.

By now, some of the other youths in the group had turned their attention away from the

ongoing Battle Lords duel and were starting to question what their friend was up to as he hurled himself into the river below. They joined Duncan on the bridge and watched as the lad swam against the current and dived down to retrieve the red velvet sack. For a time, he appeared to struggle, but quite soon he surfaced with the bag. Duncan indicated for him to travel downriver where the bankside would allow him to exit.

“Thank you,” Duncan said, taking his bag from the youth and presenting him with the promised payment.

The youth turned the silver coin over a few times, holding it up and evaluating its authenticity. Satisfied, he collected his clothes from his friends and started to pull them back on.

“Cheers,” he said to Duncan. “Wouldn’t bet on your boss not being pissed off at you, though. All those letters will be ruined.” He mimicked Duncan’s earlier drinking motion. “Maybe not so many of those next time.”

Duncan smiled and shrugged, but made no comment. The youth’s friends were exclaiming their awe of the reward, some now being quick to offer Duncan a number of other services, all of which he declined. His bag now once more in his possession, the messenger made his way back to the Half Moon Inn, leaving the excited boys behind.

“Who won?” one wanted to know.

“Who cares?” another answered. “Quinn could buy every *Frozen Fruit* in Vince’s with that much silver!”

Chapter 3

“I was wondering where your bag had got to,” Nadine said, as Duncan set it down on a nearby table of the taproom.

The messenger opened the drawstring and began sorting through the contents. Despite having spent most of the night underwater, the items within were bone dry, just as he had expected. He lifted out the itinerary the guild had given him, and began checking off each item to confirm they were all present (several letters, and a number of parcels, both large and small), before returning them to the bag.

A number of people had arrived at the inn during his absence, and they were now enjoying the breakfast that Nadine was serving, before going about the rest of their day. None paid Duncan any attention. Had they done so, they may have noticed that the total volume of items that Duncan had removed from the bag was greater than it could contain. What’s more, Duncan had lifted the bag with far more ease than the laden sack should have allowed. Nadine only smiled, having seen it many times before. Even so, the spectacle never failed to amuse.

“You are a most useful bag,” Duncan told it, as he pulled the drawstrings tight once more.

“All set?” Nadine asked. She looked over her customers to see if any of them required anything. All seemed content for now.

“All set,” Duncan said, then remembered something and reopened the bag. He felt around inside until he found his coin purse, from which he removed several pieces of gold and pressed them into Nadine’s palm.

“Oh, that’s too much,” Nadine said, looking over the coins. “Far too much.” She attempted to hand some back, but Duncan was having none of it.

“For everything you did for me last night,” he said, “and everything you continue to do, I would think it’s perhaps too little.”

The landlady looked down at the coins in her hand again, before pocketing them and looking

in the direction of the two staff that were assisting in the running of the inn. “A little extra in the purses for my two little helpers this week, then,” she said.

Duncan looked over at the two girls. They were young, maybe having only seen sixteen or seventeen summers each by his estimate. Not much older than Nadine had been herself when she had unexpectedly taken over the running of the Half Moon from her father. That itself had been some thirty summers ago.

“You’ll be heading off now, then?” Nadine asked.

“To complete my deliveries here, then down to Bluestone, to the guildhouse, and then the usual circuit around Akidos.”

“Will you be paying Gerry a visit?”

“As always.”

“Give him my love. And please be careful out there.” She was quiet for a moment as she pondered something. “I wonder if that’s how those men knew to find you here? They might have been expecting you to come to Treatwell at some point, and so decided to wait. Otherwise, they might have taken you on the road.”

Duncan didn’t know and only shrugged. He was certain he would find out the answers soon, though. He hoisted the bag, slinging the shoulder strap across him from right to left. “I’m sorry it’s been brief,” he said. “But I promise to stop by for longer on my way back south.”

“Maybe we could attend the summer equinox festival together?” Nadine suggested, drawing close to the messenger. “Do you think you’ll still be around then? It wouldn’t be too late, would it?”

“I could make a special exception for you. I can’t remember the last time I was at the festival. It would be nice to go again. With all the constant searching, I sometimes forget to live.” He chuckled and patted the amulet at his chest.

Nadine smiled. “It would be good to have a handsome young man by my side.” She placed a hand on his chest, raising her eyes to his. “Will keep some of the suitors away for a while if they figure this old girl is finally ready to settle down, and found the one to do it with. And unlike some

other men, I can trust you not to expect anything more at the end of the night.”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t.”

“A strange thing for the curse to take from you,” she said under her breath. She patted his chest gently, feeling the solid form of the amulet beneath his clothes. Her eyes tracked up to his neck, to the chain that held the charm, and Duncan allowed her to lift it out from his shirt.

“Such a pretty thing when you actually look at it,” Nadine said, holding it in one hand, her thumb brushing over the surface, feeling the pattern of the three complete corners. “An ancient depiction of the sun. I don’t think I’ve ever seen it so much as blemish.”

Duncan looked over the woman as she continued to study the amulet, her fingers straying to the missing bottom-right corner. More grey was streaking the landlady’s hair these days, the veins of her hands increasing in prominence, the wrinkles on her face etching deeper. Her youth was slipping away, as he retained his own. His own hair remained the unruly mass of black that had run down to his shoulders for many summers, never growing out any further, or even remaining short if cut. It brought Duncan sadness to watch Nadine grow old. How he longed to put an end to this blasted curse and return to a normal life.

Nadine held the amulet in silence for a moment, concentrating on it.

“Anything?” Duncan asked, after a time.

“No.”

“I’ve not felt it shift a hair’s breadth in a long while.”

Nadine nodded and released the amulet, allowing Duncan to return it to its place beneath his shirt. “It will do soon,” she said. “I know it will.”

Duncan appreciated her positivity. “Thank you.”

“You had best get going, mister. We both have jobs that need doing. I have an inn to run, and you have messages and packages to deliver. And don’t forget our deal,” she called after him, as he opened the front door of the Half Moon. “You’re on a promise to me to bidding goodbye to the summer. For me, at any rate.”

“You have my word.”

“And don’t go getting yourself trapped anywhere in the meanwhile. I might not be around to track you down and dig you out.”

Duncan’s eyes strayed to the shovel by the fireplace and chuckled. “Believe me, I never want that to happen again.”

*

End of sample

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