

1

THE SOTTED SWAN

The man in the corner leaned against the wall, his chair tipped back on two legs. His feet rested on the table in front of him, and a coarse brown hood framed his face. This restful pose was a sham. The man's eyes gleamed in the firelight as he scanned the room. A battered pewter mug sat on the table, but he hadn't touched it in a half hour or more. A huge staff, six feet of oak, stood against the wall nearby, in easy reach of his enormous right hand, and I could see a glint of steel at his belt under the folds of his cloak. The staff had some unsavory reddish-brown stains on it, soaked into the wood. All in all, he appeared ready to break heads at the slightest provocation, and the other patrons at the Sotted Swan kept their distance. No doubt about it — he looked like trouble, the kind of trouble that required mopping afterward.

He was my partner, Boog. He and I were part of the Inquisitor's Guild, tasked with investigating crimes and upholding the laws of Frosthelm. Today, our intrepid service to Frosthelm consisted of sitting near-motionless in a tavern for three hours. It had been a distinctly unremarkable experience. I sat at the other end of the room from Boog, near the fireplace, also with a clear view of the door. The chimney wasn't drawing, and soot coated the walls and ceiling all around me. My eyes were red from the smoke, my nose was running, and my throat felt like I'd swallowed a nail, or maybe a bucket of nails. I wiped my nose yet again on my once-gaudy kerchief. Next time, I vowed, I get to pick where we sit.

The door opened, letting in a blast of cold but thankfully smoke-free air. I caught a glimpse of the muscular tavern guard outside, and then a smaller man pushed past him. This new arrival paused in the doorway, hands on his hips, surveying the room as if he were its lord and master. He was dressed in a red jacket with a green silk sash, orange trousers, and embroidered floppy boots. His hair was long, brown, and shiny, and he'd pressed it into curly ringlets at the ends. After a quick glance, I was careful not to look his way or attract attention, but I saw that Boog had spotted our target as well. Stennis Shortsaber, probably guilty of theft, definitely guilty of dressing himself this way.

My partner lowered his feet from the table and picked up his mug. As he took a drink, he flexed the fingers of his free hand, still resting on the table. I squinted through my watery eyes. Boog was using our guild's hand speech, the Argot. Though his gaze was focused on his mug, his fingers were busy. *Wait*, he signed. Of course. We'd already agreed to see whom Stennis was meeting. *Armed. Sword. Dagger boot.*

Stennis' long fencing blade was obvious, but I hadn't noticed the small hilt poking up from the flowery cuff of his boot. I put my kerchief back in my pocket and replied. *Wait for other.*

A hint of a grin crossed Boog's face. *Chicken is love.*

I squinted again, then rolled my eyes. Boog's thick fingers weren't quite nimble enough for the Argot, and as a result, he didn't like the lessons much. He frequently got parts wrong. I signed back. *What?*

Boog looked faintly annoyed. *Chicken. Is. Love. You. Idiot.* His motions were still subtle, but his knuckles whitened a bit on "idiot."

I raised an eyebrow. Stennis slapped the bar loudly and called for the tavern keeper's finest ale. I had to give the guy some credit for flamboyance. Most thieves would rather not be noticed, but he was awfully sure of himself. Sable, the burly bartender, gave Stennis the eye. Then she picked a mug off a

shelf — the shelf for already-used mugs, I noted with some pleasure — and poured a foamy draft from the large keg set in the wall behind the bar. She set the glass in front of Stennis.

Stennis quaffed his ale with audible swallowing sounds and slapped the glass down again with a thunderous belch. I guessed that he probably practiced this in front of a mirror at home. “Another, milady,” he called, waving a finger in the air.

“I’ll be seeing the color of your coin first,” growled Sable.

Stennis smirked, reached into his crimson jacket, and dropped a fat pouch onto the counter with a resounding tinkly thud. A few gold coins spilled out, enough to buy a number of rounds for the whole establishment. Or maybe even the establishment itself. That wasn’t good. Our prior investigation indicated that Stennis was quite the dandy, but that he was often near poverty from gambling, drinking, romancing, or general incompetence. If the rest of his pouch was filled with gold, it meant he’d probably sold the stolen jewelry already, and our chances of recovering it were remote.

Sable smoothly refilled the mug, and as Stennis turned to survey the tavern, she just as smoothly plucked a gold coin from the top of the pouch and dropped it into the pocket of her greasy apron. Stennis was none the wiser, though what he was now slurping had cost him what I was paid for three months’ work. *Bottoms up*, I thought.

The door slammed open again, blown by the wind, and a hooded woman stalked in, pausing only to wipe her feet and brush some snow off her cloak. She pushed back her hood, revealing a thin, worn face with coal-black eyes. She wore a dull brown cap that extended from her close-cropped hairline in front down to the back of her neck, and there was a thick purple line, a scar, running from the left side of her chin down to where it disappeared under her cloak.

The woman saw Stennis at the bar. Not surprising, as Stennis shot his hand up in greeting and then beckoned with both arms, his face beaming. The woman pursed her lips and headed over. She spoke to the bartender, who pulled a small glass and a bottle of red liquid from behind the bar. The

barkeep filled the glass, pushed it across, then retreated to the other end of the bar. Interesting, I thought. The woman must be a regular patron, or maybe it was on Stennis' coin?

The woman spoke to Stennis, quiet and earnest. Stennis threw his head back, laughing, and then put his hand on the woman's shoulder. She looked at the hand as if it were a dead fish, and Stennis pulled it back, a bit chastened. Stennis listened, attentive, as the woman continued to speak. Stennis occasionally nodded or said a few words I couldn't overhear. The woman grew more agitated. Stennis' smile became strained, and he made placating gestures with his hands. Finally, the woman slammed her palms on the bar and shouted "Where is it?" The babble of conversation running through the tavern ceased for a moment as the patrons turned to look.

This was interesting. Who was this woman? A jewelry merchant? Stennis' partner? Or someone else? I cast a quick glance at Boog, and he gave the faintest of shrugs. If I was correct that Stennis had already turned over his haul and been paid, what was going on here? Had Stennis held back something important? Tried to keep something for himself?

Stennis was taken aback at the woman's display of temper. He tucked a stray ringlet of hair back behind his ear, straightened his shirt, and then reached into a pouch at his belt. He pulled out a necklace and held it up to show the woman. A shiny silver and gold talisman dangled at the end of a gold chain.

We had to do something. That amulet matched our reports. *Stolen*, I signed. Boog nodded. I hopped up from my seat and strode toward the bar where the two stood. Boog stirred as well. His fingers closed around his staff as he rose from his chair. He moved to cover the door.

"Inquisitors!" I shouted, trying for my deepest, loudest voice. It turned out a little croaky, but authoritatively so, I hoped. "Stennis Shortsaber! Halt!"

Stennis turned toward me, his face first showing alarm but quickly twisting into a sneer. His companion looked down at

me and frowned. I'm not a big man. In fact, most would call me short, and scrawny to boot. But I was trying my hardest to be the intimidating presence of the law. It wasn't working – the cloaked woman with the vicious scar looked less like she feared arrest and more like she'd found a hair in her soup.

Ignoring me, the woman turned and lunged for the pendant in Stennis' hand, but Stennis was too quick. He danced back, his eyes bright, holding his prize above his head. "Twenty more in gold, or you'll never get it." Stennis took another step back and leapt across a table. A mug crashed to the floor.

The cloaked woman's eyes were cold, and her expression dour. "You'll get what you deserve," she said, her voice low. I was reasonably certain she didn't mean twenty sovereigns. She turned her attention to me.

I swallowed. "I'll need to bring you in for questioning, citizen," I said. "You are associating with a wanted criminal."

The woman gave me a grim smile. Her lips formed low syllables, but the words were in some foreign tongue. She raised her arms, her cloak billowing behind her. An icy cold bit my cheeks, and a tingling ran down my arms and legs. I grimaced. Just what I needed, a miscreant who used the arcane arts. I yanked my warding rod from my belt, hoping to absorb whatever she was going to throw at me. I held up the rod between us. There was a chorus of cries and frantic chatter as the tavern patrons backed away.

The woman wore a simple band of gray metal on her right wrist, and as her chanting intensified, blue sparks arced from this bracelet to her hand and fingers. She thrust out her right hand, palm first, and a bolt of sparking energy flew from it. Not at me, though – at Stennis. The bolt struck the amulet Stennis held. He yelped in pain, but he did not drop the amulet, even as sparks buzzed and crackled around it. All but the drunkest of customers now scrambled for cover. I heard a shout from somewhere behind me. "Bloodmother!"

The woman's chanting changed to short, guttural syllables. Some new spell. Had the last one not worked? I could feel my hair stand up, pulled toward the cloaked woman's magical

aura. I raised up my warding rod and hoped that whatever was about to happen wouldn't hurt a great deal.

There was a resounding *POP!* It was accompanied by a flash of green light that left spots in my vision. The woman vanished. A moment later, I had a disturbing feeling of a wave of energy passing through me. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it was not altogether pleasant. My mouth went bitter, and I felt a pang of fear and discomfort, as if I were watching a small child stumble next to a cliff's edge.

Blinking, I looked around. I appeared to be unharmed, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. A silence had descended over the tavern, and all of the patrons were rubbing their eyes or staring slack-jawed at the space so recently vacated by the cloaked woman. All save one, that is – Stennis stared at the amulet in his hand. It jumped and twirled, dancing with sparks, glowing faintly in the orange-red color of ripe melon. Whatever magic the scarred woman had worked, it had brought the amulet to life. As Stennis and I stared, the amulet's gyrations and light intensified, and it gave off a sound like a distant, unending scream.

Stennis looked back at me, and then he was a blur of motion, stuffing the amulet into his shirt, diving over the bar, scrabbling to make an escape out the back. I started after him, but I needn't have. In the confusion over the cloaked woman's disappearance, Boog had come up to us from his position at the door. Now, he reached over the bar, grabbed Stennis by the back of his jacket, hauled him back across the bar, and dumped him on the floor at our feet. But rather than sprawling amid the ale-soaked rushes, Stennis landed on his toes and leapt up again, drawing his saber in one fluid motion. "Heyya!" he yelled, waving the tip of his blade at Boog, who glared back with obvious disdain.

"Yes, heyya." I said, pushing my way over to them. "You really don't want to do that. It will go much better for you if you come peacefully to answer some questions."

“Stennis goes peacefully with no man!” he cried, slicing the blade dangerously about. That didn’t make a lot of sense, but I think he was focusing more on style.

Boog grew irritable. “Put down the blade, Stennis.” He hefted his staff with both hands and put on his I’ll-eat-you-for-breakfast-with-kippers face. He was about a foot taller than Stennis, even if you gave Stennis his teased-up hair.

“I warn you, sir, I’d sooner unman you as look at you!” Stennis made a small feint at Boog, who didn’t flinch.

“Unman me? Really.” Boog frowned. “But you’re the one they call Shortsaber.”

Stennis gasped, and his eyes widened. “You’ll pay for that!” He lunged.

Boog knocked the saber easily aside and swung for Stennis’ head, but the fop was quick. He ducked and sliced again, his quick blade raking across the leather covering Boog’s chest. Boog was more than competent with his staff, but the saber was a weapon of far greater finesse, and for all his dandified appearance, Stennis fought with a deadly grace.

I struck the end of my warding rod with my palm, and the rod hummed with magical energy. It would paralyze anything it touched now. I circled around behind Stennis as he traded blows and insults with Boog. I swung the rod at Stennis a few times, but the thin thief dodged and pranced so quickly it was difficult to land a blow. Boog was sweating, and his forehead bled from a deep cut. Stennis took a step back, toward me, and I lunged at his back with my small rod. Just as I did so, however, Stennis dropped to one knee and pulled his dagger out of his boot. My rod barely grazed his right cheek, not nearly enough to put him down, but I did hear a satisfying “Yeoww!”

He spun to me in a rage. “Youw doghh. Ah kih you wheh you stan!” Apparently, my rod had numbed his face somewhat. “Yuh bluh wih rung redh ovuh mah blayed.” Boog’s staff whistled at Stennis, but he dodged and kicked Boog hard in the chest, toppling him backward into a chair. Stennis then flung

his dagger at me, but I ducked easily under the hurtling blade. From somewhere behind me I heard a surprised “Hey!”

“Dah, you pigh!” shouted Stennis. The front of Stennis’ jacket writhed and bucked as the amulet moved underneath it, and I could hear the eerie screaming noise intensify. I held my rod in front of me, barely a foot long against Stennis’ three feet of steel. Stennis swung madly at me, but I blocked his first four blows, the blade clanging against the stone of my rod. The fifth, though, sent my rod spinning to the floor. I saw Stennis attempt an evil grin with the left side of his mouth. He lunged at me with his blade, and I pondered which of my organs would soon be punctured.

With a rush of wind, Boog’s staff swung down, crunching on Stennis’ wrist, diverting his blade down between my knees, and leaving me happily free from unwanted holes. I looked down at the saber as Stennis cried out and dropped his sword, and Boog swung back with an expert counterstroke at Stennis’ head.

One thing I’ll give Stennis – he may have had horrible taste in clothes and a lousy head for money, but he was good in a fight. With a grunt, he launched himself backward onto the bar, slid across it, and dropped down. Boog swore as his staff met only air.

“Youw bastahs wih nevah take me awive!” cried Stennis, cradling his damaged sword hand. He spat at us awkwardly and dashed toward the kitchen and freedom. “Nevah!” His voice faded as he turned the corner. “No mah cah beeh me! No mah—”

There was a terrific blast from the kitchen. The bar patrons cringed, and I took a quick step backward. A mass of dark liquid flew out the kitchen doorway and across the bar, coating most of my upper body. I felt disgustingly warm and sticky.

I’ll be the first to admit, I have a healthy aversion both to conflict and to injury, but I try very hard to suppress this when performing my duties, and I think I do a pretty damn good job most of the time. I say this because this particular instance was

not my finest hour. I gurgled, I scraped at the liquid and the warm bits it contained, I hopped around in circles spitting and yelling. Finally, a huge hand on my shoulder stopped my gyrations.

“Stew,” said Boog.

“Whuh?” I replied.

“Stew, Marty. It’s stew.” Boog pulled something off my cheek. A large slice of carrot. I stuck out my tongue and licked my face. Salty, but good. Needed something — maybe more tomatoes.

“Let’s go,” shouted Boog. He vaulted the bar, his staff in one hand. I clambered over it after him.

We needn’t have hurried. As we entered the kitchen, I stumbled over an embroidered boot. We passed the upended stew pot among the other dishes, spoons, and cutlery scattered on the floor. As we neared the tavern’s back door, the floor took on a reddish hue, and we began to see bits of charred flesh and bone mixed with expensive, gaudy shreds of orange and red fabric. The air was smoky and the odor oppressive. We found most of a leg. I felt a bit light-headed, but Boog pressed on undaunted.

On the floor of the kitchen, in the center of a torn and smoking red jacket, lay the pendant Stennis had kept from the mysterious scarred woman. It was clean, untouched, and it no longer danced or screamed. The talisman at the end of the chain was of a strange design – a metal ring containing two symbols. On the right was a moon of beaten silver, and on the left, a sunburst of gold, peeking out from behind the moon.

Boog went over to one side and picked up something. I glanced over and immediately wished I hadn’t. Boog put it down and pulled a few long, brown, oily, curly hairs off his hand. “Looks like we caught him, Marty.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice, and sighed. This was going to be hard to explain. It’s not every day your prisoner explodes.