

SWORDS IN THE FORGE

A tale of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser

by

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CHAPTER ONE

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TWO SOUGHT ADVENTURE

It was late summer on Rime Isle. The heather that grew on the low hills above Salthaven was turning from pale green to pale gold, and though the weather remained hot, still there was something in the air that had the villagers recaulking the chinks in their log houses and airing out the heavy blankets.

This summer had been the quietest in recent memory, largely because those two resident strangers, Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, who had turned everything topsy turvy when they first arrived here some seven years ago, and had kept things lively ever since, were this year most un-lively and morose neighbors, going about their duties of trade and defence in a blue haze of

depression that seemed to infect the entire population. Even the attentions and ministrations of their wise and handsome ladies, Fafhrd's Afreyt and Mouser's Cif, could not raise them out of their uncharacteristic gloom.

Strangely it was the spring thaw, which brightens most spirits, that had sunk the two into their funk. The ice floes had just relaxed their grip on the northern sea and allowed the first trading ships to fight their way to Salthaven's rocky harbor when, within a space of three days, Fafhrd's coltish daughter, Fingers, and Mouser's wiry son Pshawri, without word nor note, disappeared from the island. Cif and Afreyt argued convincingly that what with all the training in swordwork both youths had received, there could have been no kidnapping involved, and that therefore the two must have slipped away voluntarily. Fafhrd and Mouser allowed that there was merit to this argument, but seemed in no way cheered by it.

And so, this particular afternoon in the middle of Satyr's Moon found them, as had almost every afternoon of the last three months, in the Sea Wrack, huddled silent over the chessboard, sipping gah-veh and playing protracted, distracted games. Even the docking of a Lankhmar bark just a little before noon hadn't levered them out of the dim tavern and into the watery, slanticular sunshine. They had but waved listless hands at their

lieutenants and returned to another in a saga of stalemated battles.

There was much work to be done at the docks - barrels of salted meats and casks of Lankhmar's famous resinous wine to be rolled down the gangplanks, baskets of southern fruits, plucked unripe and allowed to mellow on the month-long voyage, to be handed down, bolts of cloth, bricks of tea and sacks of gah-veh, to be edged onto pallets and windlassed from deck to dock - so it was afternoon before Skullick, Fafhrd's towering berserker lieutenant, and Mikkidu, the diminutive mingol who had been moved up to the lieutenancy of Mouser's thieves now that Pshawri was gone, could turn their attention to the two men from the ship who so patiently waited for it. The first, the quartermaster, pulled Mikkidu aside and bent to whisper in his ear, while the other, a spice and scent merchant traveling under the bark's protection, stood on tippy-toe to do the same with Skullick.

Upon the conclusion of these whisperings, the faces of both Skullick and Mikkidu shone with hope and wonder, and they quickly ushered the two men to the dust motes and dimness of the Sea Wrack and into the presence of the hunched and seldom moving shapes that sat there-in.

"Captains! Letters for you both!" Spoke Mikkidu.

"From Lankhmar, Captain. Both of them!" Added Skullick eagerly.

Fafhrd and Mouser turned reluctantly from their game and took the proffered letters as if they received such every day.

"Probably some disreputable Lankhmar lord begging us to come out of retirement to plunder for his collection the emerald heart of a Kleshite idol," grumbled Fafhrd as he cracked the wax seal on his missive.

"Or a recently wealthy Craft Street merchant who wants the advice of the two best thieves no longer in Lankhmar on the integrity of his locks and watchmen," muttered Mouser as he slit the twine that bound his.

But suddenly, before Mouser could do more than note the familiarity of the stiff script scrawled upon his letter, Fafhrd was whooping and pounding the table. "My girl! My princess! Mouser, she writes!"

Mouser didn't hear, and the scattered chessmen that rolled off the table into his lap did not tear his eyes away from the curling leaves of parchment in his hands. At last he looked up into Fafhrd's shining eyes, his own alight and amidst.

"Pshawri lives."

The news spread quickly from Skullick and Mikkidu to all corners of the village. Afreyt and Cif gave each other looks

when they heard that said, "We knew it all the time," but found themselves letting out breaths that seemed to have been held for three months. The thieves and berserks filled the Sea Wrack and nigh drained her of ale and stout, and the two messengers found that the doom of bearers of good news were tankards that never emptied and too many hearty backslappings from gigantic northern barbarians.

The eye of this hurricane of joy was quiet with concentration as the two fathers poured over their offsprings' epistles. With each paragraph, it was as if a boulder was lifted off the cairn of worry they had entombed themselves in, until by the end of the letters they were laughing and calling for strong wine and hot food such as they hadn't had the stomach for all summer long. And as they downed their first jugs and waited on the kitchen's bounty, they boasted of how their progeny were making their way in the world and pressed upon each other their respective letters as proof.

With indulgent eyes, Fafhrd read Pshawri's letter to Mouser. It began...

Captain Father,

Greetings from a craven and unworthy son. I apologize for so cowardly a leavetaking, but I could

not face you. After all the kindnesses you have done me, even before knowing the true nature of our relationship - advancing me in rank and trusting me to responsibilities far beyond my years - how could I tell you that I wanted to leave, to waste all the wisdom you have imparted to me and strike out on my own.

Forgive me, Father. Though Rime Isle has loved me well, it is a very small isle. Yes, there is much to do - trading, building and preparing for winter, and these are fine tasks for settled men such as yourself and captain Fafhrd, but I am not a settled man. I want to make a name for myself, a name that will be writ as large on the history of Newhon as your own. I have chafed in secret for years at the confines of our routine. Always I would say, "After next month's careening I am away." And then, "Once we get the timber in from Ool Hrusp, then I shall go." But the tasks never ended and I saw the months turning into years and decades and finally I knew I must leave NOW or spend the rest of my days wondering in anguish.

So, when old Turrip and his Sea-Mingols docked soon after break-up, I decided the time had come. I

approached him with my meager savings and bought from him passage and his silence. It was a long trip, but I have made my way at last to Lankhmar and my destiny.

I hope that I have your forgiveness, Father, and that you remember when you too were once young and sought adventure. To that end, I must tell you that I already have my first commission. After a scant month's amateur thieving, I have been hired by a consortium of wine makers to acquire for them an artifact known as the Scalpel of Incisive Reasoning. The risk is great, but I welcome risk, for with great risk comes great glory and with luck and the skills with which you have furnished me, I hope soon to hear my name whispered in Cheap Street and Plague Court as the best thief in Lankhmar.

Until I write again, I am your loving and respectful son...

Pshawri

P.S. I am at no fixed address as yet, but your letters will find me at the Silver Eel.

And with expansive heart, Mouser read Fingers letter to

Fafhrd, which started...

Dearest Father,

I hope you have not worried overmuch at my disappearance. It would wound me to hear that you thought me killed or kidnapped or worse, for you have been a great teacher, you and my little uncle and great and little aunts, and surely you must believe that I am capable of handling myself in any situation. Besides, you must have seen this coming.

I am nineteen years, father! Rime Isle strangled me like last year's tunic; a lovely cloth and comfy once, but now too tight by far. And it is partially your fault, yours and Uncle Mouser's, with your tales of daring thefts, of towers, jewels, skulls and swords. Since before you knew me I had a romantical and imaginative nature and you have done nothing to curb it. Instead you have inflamed it.

At last I could no longer stomach Rime Isle's bland, solid pleasures. I wanted spice, danger! I wanted to live before I died, like you did. And so, I have come, by Ithmar trader, to Lankhmar, to seek my own adventures and make my own name in the City of the

Black Toga.

I find Lankhmar hotter, smokier, and more crowded than your tales made it seem, but truly, it is a place where anything can happen. And I have not sat idly by waiting for these happenings to come to me. I feel as if the city were mine for the taking and have started to do just that, one piece at a time.

And already these first tentative forays have stood me well, for just today, I have been approached by a cadre of wine importers to procure for them an item they name the Scalpel of Incisive Reasoning. There is some little danger, they say, but the return, not so much in gold, but in reputation? That is worth ten times the danger!

With this and more commissions to come, I hope soon to be hailed from Marsh Gate to the Overlord's Palace as the best thief in Lankhmar.

With love to you and Lady Afreyt, and also Mou and Cif, I am your loving daughter...

Caelyx

P.S. You were expecting "Fingers" I know, but I have long thought that Fingers is a child's name and

not suitable for adventuring, and so have re-taken the name of my birth.

P.P.S. The mails do not enter my ward of Lankmar, but your letters will reach me at the Golden Lamprey.

Fafhrd and Mouser had smiled pleasantly as they read, and here and there chuckled at the unconscious insults and incautious boasts of each other's offspring, but as they reached the last paragraphs, their smiles faded and they exchanged worried glances.

"This bodes ill." Intoned Fafhrd.

The Mouser tried a laugh. "Twin jobs, aye. But what odds on both choosing the same night to attempt them?"

Fafhrd smiled sadly and raised a shaggy eyebrow. Mouser sighed and sat back, nodding. Both knew that whatever the odds, they would be beaten, for a question had at long last been answered. The two youths truly were their issue, for they had both inherited their fathers' most identifying curse.

CHAPTER TWO

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ILL MET IN LANKHMAR

A short thief and a tall thief eyed each other warily, swords drawn, over the bodies of three bull-chested, blade-tusked watch-boars in the dimness of a high-walled garden behind an ornate townhouse. The house belonged to Count Flithen, an ardent collector of eldritch curios, who, conveniently, was out "collecting" this night. The gibbous moon, barely visible through Lankhmar's fabled night smogs, made dark chiaroscuro of the two prowlers' faces.

"You're no sentry." Hissed the short thief.

"And you no Count." Breathed the tall thief.

"Then our purposes here seem identical."

"Seem? Surely must be!"

"Hmmm, a pity. For I'll not let any stand in my..." The short thief paused, staring suddenly at the tall thief, trying to assay height, carriage and physique in the uncertain gloom.

"What look you, shrimp?" Sneered the tall thief, but the other only peered closer.

"Fingers?"

"What? Who knows my-- Pshawri? By the Great Mother! How..."

They stared each other up and down. Fingers - or Caelyx, we should say, if we are to respect her wishes - who's last growth spurt had pushed her within inches of her father's nigh seven foot height, loomed over Pshawri like the proud figurehead of some No-Olmbrusk longship. She was built in proportion too, with broad shoulders, slim hips, and hard arms and flanks from the years of sword instruction required of all acolytes of the goddess, particularly those under the stern tutelage of the Ladies Cif and Afreyt, and also from other, looser, but possibly more useful lessons provided by her father and uncle, who were only the two best swordsmen in this or any world.

At nineteen, her face had begun to lose its roundness as her father's bones sharpened her cheeks and jawline. Her mother, Frixia, was to be found in the full lips and dark-lashed green eyes that flirted from behind an unruly mane of flaming red, and also, of course, in the plump, pointed breasts that softened her

otherwise boyish physique.

She was dressed in an elaborate imagining of thief-wear that owed more to the theatrical than to the practical - black, knee-length boots, a black linen shirt with voluminous sleeves, bloused just so, dark green breeches girt at the waist and along both thighs with all manner of sword belts, hangers, knife straps, pouches and wallets, and a thigh-length black cloak with a green satin lining. Her sword was a heavy, swept-hilt rapier, a good octave longer in the blade than was customary.

Pshawri too had his father's stamp all over him, from his wiry acrobat's body to the slim fingers, sharp black eyes and impish pug nose in the center of his angular brown face. That face, though, was mostly his mother Freg's; several shades darker than Mouser's, with the broad, flat cheekbones and wide curved lips of the eastern lands. It gave him, along with his long, thick eyelashes and arched brows, sly, pretty, looks that clashed oddly with his solemn demeanor.

He wore nothing but black knee-length breeches and flat, laced moccasins. A sword strap went over one corded brown shoulder, and a dagger and pouch hung from his belt. A scimitar dangled from his left hand -- at ease, but not un-ready.

"How come you here?" Whispered Pshawri. There was hurt in his voice, as if he was wounded that she had stolen his idea.

"I might ask the same of you." There was a sneer in hers, thinly veneered over a quaver of panic. There wasn't supposed to be an audience. Not yet!

Pshawri puffed himself up. "I've come to Lankhmar to thieve a name for myself."

Caelyx copied his gesture, but with her height, had better results. "As have I, and require no aid from old nursery chums."

"Aid? The Scalpel's mine! You'll need aid wresting it from me!"

"It's mine! I have staked my name--"

It was only then that it returned to them just where they were and how uncertain their situation, and only because at that moment, a form like a midnight comet hurtled over their heads, followed at once by two more, crossing the trajectory of the first at angles. Like comets, the forms trailed ghostly silver tails that snaked down around Caelyx and Pshawri as the three forms landed beyond them.

As one, the silver tails snapped tight, and Caelyx and Pshawri found themselves in the center of a close, thrumming triangle of grey cord that glinted strangely in the moonlight. Each of the three ropes that made up the sides of the triangle was held taut by two midnight-black, dreadlocked Kleshite women.

Not one of the six women was over five feet in height, but

all had the shoulders and stance of acrobats. They wore tight-fitting livery of deepest red and the soft-soled slippers favored by tumblers and ropewalkers. But their most curious costuming was their gauntlets - thick, outsized mitts that covered arms up to elbows, the palms and insides of the fingers sewn over with the finest chainmail. One gauntlet held the rope while the other gripped the haft of a long, triangularly-bladed dart that tipped each end of the silvered cords.

But Caelyx and Pshawri must take all this in in an instant, for no sooner did the women stretch their ropes tight, than they were moving again, diving over and under each other, three clockwise and three counter, weaving around Caelyx and Pshawri a deadly knot.

Pshawri's catlike reflexes, fatherborn and shipboard taught, were still only just fast enough. He dropped instantly down, the rope fluttering his hair as his head ducked the loops, but his hands, raised to narrow his body, were caught at the wrist. Pshawri pulled and instantly learned the significance of the cord's moonlight glinting and the Kleshite's chainmesh gloves - blade-wire, woven into the hemp! His hands came free at the price of pain, red gashes welling blood on wrists and roots of thumbs. His scimitar scraped after, spitting sparks.

Caelyx's reactions were not a whit slower, but she was

regrettably longer in the torso and the ropes caught her high in the chest, squeezing and abrading her cruelly. She tried to angle her rapier at the cords, but her arms were pinned. The blade dangled, useless, as her feet tried desperately to maintain her balance.

Pshawri ran at the two nearest women, but they dove left and right, one high, one low, like spiders dancing on the ends of silver threads. Pshawri leapt over the lower cord, but the high one snapped against his collar bone and slammed him to the ground, a leaking red line painted across his chest.

The ebon sprites sprang after him, stabbing down with their brass darts, but Caelyx, dodging an attack of her own, surged backwards, and pulled the slashing sisters off balance at the cost of her black linen shirt and the tender flesh beneath. Their brass blades missed Pshawri by a hairsbreadth, the cool flat of one laying against his cheek.

As the two She-Kleshites rocked their blades out of the hard earth and started to rise, Pshawri kipped up into a low knee-spin, his scimitar arcing around him like a fan blade, and hamstringed them both, the first at the ankles and the second behind the knees. They fell screaming and writhing, and fouled the ropes of their nearest comrades, who Pshawri leapt to close with.

On Caelyx's far side, two more tanglers cinched her legs tight at the knees. She wove like a cedar in a windstorm, her ankles grinding together, as one hauled on her rope and the other spun in, slashing high over her head at Caelyx's throat. The ropes made it impossible for Caelyx to pull back, but there was give the other way. Caelyx jerked forward, inside the arc of the Kleshite's dart, and head-butted her - bending almost double to do so. The woman dropped the dart and staggered back, clutching her erupting nose.

Caelyx shouldered the wounded sprite into her companion as the woman leapt in, dart first. They fell, but Caelyx did too, toppling forward to lie face-first across the top of a springy, thorny shrub.

Meanwhile, Pshawri had dispatched a third tangler with ease, aided when Caelyx's clumsy lumbering had jerked the Kleshite off her feet. A forth, seeing how her sister had fared, severed her own rope and faced Pshawri free of the surging web. Pshawri hopped forward, beating at the brass blade and the battle was joined.

Sinking into the shrubbery, Caelyx heard the two tanglers she had flattened sitting up again and knew she must turn or die. They were on their feet now and springing! With an undignified spasm, Caelyx humped herself upright and spun like a

dervish. The darts that hung from her razored cocoon flung themselves out, carving coppery circles at the limits of their ropes.

One dart knocked the nearer tangler on the temple and she went down again, but the other ducked low and lunged. She failed to see a third dart, the razor sharp tip of which scratched a thin red line across her throat. Cursing, she kicked Caelyx in the hip, overbalancing her, and stepped in, her own dart raised high. But just then, with a hiss like an angry asp, a fine red mist sprayed from her carotid artery. The tangler clutched her neck, eyes bulging in terror.

An unwise move.

As Caelyx watched, revulsed, the pressure of the woman's fingers split her carotid wide and the ruddygore soaked her to the navel in seconds.

The tangler collapsed, revealing behind her the sight of Pshawri thrusting his blade through the last attacker's eye. The Kleshite dropped to the ground, instantly dead. Pshawri stared blankly at her corpse.

"Pshawri! Loose me!" Caelyx whispered harshly, and when he didn't answer, "Do you hear?"

Pshawri wiped his sword on the grass with a distracted air.

"Hist! Pshawri!"

"I'd forgotten what it's like." He said finally, sheathing his scimitar by finger touch. "I'd forgotten how red."

"Pshawri! Stop maundering! Loose me!"

Pshawri blinked and slowly seemed to return to himself.

"Fingers, well... well fought."

He knelt and began the prickly task of cutting through Caelyx's bladewire prison. Caelyx snarled in disgust. "Well fought? I never had my sword free."

"And you proved yourself two blades' equal bound and unsworded. A mighty accomplishment."

"Feh! Where's the glory in the telling? Besting miniature rope twirlers by writhing like a silkworm? Such is not the stuff of sagas. It's Caelyx now, by the way." She said, offhand.

"Fingers is dead."

Pshawri's eyebrows rose, bemused, as he severed her last knot. "You too? Pshawri's dead as well. It's..." And suddenly he realized he'd never said it aloud before. "...It's Manx now."

Caelyx smiled, but indulgently. Pshawri had freed her after all. She rose gingerly. "Manx? The cat with no tail?"

Pshawri was sheepish. "No tale as yet. It will grow with each adventure."

Caelyx chuckled. "Well, you might have done worse. Black Ratter springs to mind. But now what about this scalpel we both

require? Do we kill each other for't now?"

Pshawri - rather Manx - relieved that she had taken his new identity so calmly in stride, grinned happily. This was exactly the sort of brave conversation he'd longed for all his life.

"Later, I think. T'would be best to wait 'til we have it to fight over, agreed?"

"Agreed." Caelyx too was suddenly excited. In fact it was all she could do to keep from erupting in girlish giggles. Pain, death and all, this was her dream, happening awake! "Shall we?"

Manx bowed. "After you."

As they strode toward the open doors of the house, Manx glanced at Caelyx and noticed a wire-scratched nipple peeking out from the ruin of her shredded shirt. His heart lurched, banging once like a stone drum, and he looked quickly away, a flush crawling into his cheeks. What was wrong with him? He'd known this girl for years. The surprise of it. That was all. That was the cause of this sudden heat.

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After that, the job went without a hitch, almost. Yes, the strong room posed some difficulties. There was a poison lock to disarm and pick, and once inside, blades that shot out from the walls, and skull-crushing weights that dropped from the ceiling

when particular items were removed from their pedestals, but the information provided by their employers had been good and their reflexes better, so Manx suffered only a ten inch scrape across the ribs, and Caelyx's double vision cleared in less than a day.

At last they had the flat, heavy, sigil-inscribed box in hand. Caelyx, elated with their success and still a little dizzy, was ready to leave, but Manx stopped her, saying that they must make sure.

He brought the box to a table and undid seven seals, five clasps and three leather straps and lifted the lid. The interior was a silty blue-green velvet unpleasantly reminiscent of mildew, shaped to the lines of the blade, a beautiful slim silver dagger with an inlaid seam of ruby that ran from a pommel made of a single, plum-sized black pearl, down the hilt and blade to within an inch of the tip. It was a handsome design, but it made Manx think uneasily of arteries and hearts. He nodded, suddenly white-lipped with tension.

"That's it," he said. "Exactly as described. Now we go."

He made to close the case, but Caelyx slammed it open.

"We?" She drawled. "And where do WE go?"

"Well, I was going to suggest..." Manx fully intended a reasonable answer, but Caelyx's sneering tone raised his ire. She'd still be tangled in the Kleshite cat's cradle if not for

him. He gripped the case. "Stay if you wish. I go to my employer's, with the blade!"

Caelyx's eyes flashed. How dare he? What was he even doing here? He was ruining her perfect adventure, reminding her of all the hardheaded dullness she'd tried to escape by leaving Rime Isle. He should be back there licking Uncle Mouser's boots like he always had!

"Then you go through me, dwarf!"

She too grabbed for the case. He slapped her hand away and suddenly they were lurching this way and that, knocking into shelves and sending jewel-filled boxes and curios smashing to the tile floor.

"Outsize fishwife!"

"Dog jockey!"

"Behemoth"

Neither heard, under their thrashing and cursing, a high keening, like a mongrel whining for a choice chop, that seemed to come from the dagger's open case.

"Marmoset!" Shrilled Caelyx.

"Man!" Spat Manx.

With a savage twist and push, Caelyx broke free of Manx's grip and lunged again for the table, not this time grabbing for the case, but for the dagger itself. The keening was a wail now,

that echoed her own mindless bloodlust.

Manx leapt after her and tackled her high in the back. They crashed into the table, upsetting it as they flailed at each other. The case skittered across the floor and slammed shut against the far wall.

The keening cut off and with it, a red mist evaporated from before Caelyx's eyes. She found herself sitting on Manx's chest with her hands around his neck, while he had his fingers up her nostrils as if attempting to rip her nose from her face. His eyes cleared as well, and they instantly let go their death grips and slowly looked toward the dagger's closed case.

"Scalpel of Incisive Reasoning, my Quarmalian grandmother!" snarled Caelyx. "Say rather Dagger of Discord."

Manx coughed and massaged his neck. "These wine makers who employed me said they intended this blade as a token of friendship to patch a feud with a coalition of wine importers. Ha! I think instead they meant to gift them with their doom."

Caelyx nodded. "And my employers, who must be the self-same wine importers, intended the same sneaky fate for your winemakers."

Manx shook his head, wonderingly. "The deviousness of merchants outstrips a thief's direst plottings."

Suddenly, in the same instant, it came to them both that

this conversation was being carried out in the odd, intimate position their wrestling had left them in; Caelyx on Manx's chest, and Manx's hands on Caelyx's breech-clad legs.

Caelyx sprang to her feet instantly, blushing, while Manx sat up and quickly turned to the wall to make a great show of closing the case's straps, seals and clasps. Caelyx made equal show of sword-checking and cape-straightening.

"So," Said Manx at last, talking apparently to a small silver elephant. "What DO we do? These merchants may be playing foul with one another, but mine at least have not yet broken faith with me."

"Nor have mine." Said Caelyx, speaking seemingly to a porcelain urn. "A dilemma indeed. If it got out that personal matters compromised my first hiring..."

"Perhaps our employers would be satisfied with the knowledge of their enemies' intentions." Suggested Manx, turning.

Their eyes met and they flushed anew. Manx stuttered, then continued.

"Would... would that not eliminate the need for such subtleties as cursed love gifts?"

Caelyx nodded, flames still burning in her cheeks. Why had she never noticed Manx's eyes before? "And we might then hold an

auction between them. For an object of such power the price would be... uh, quite high."

Manx's stepped toward her, eyes bright. "Sixty-sixty?"

"Sixty-sixty."

Caelyx held out a hand. Manx clasped it. They stared into each other's eyes. Manx swallowed. Her lips...

She turned abruptly. "Good. But the dagger is hardly the only item of interest here. Shall we?"

Manx recovered himself, then bowed. "After you."

They opened their sacks.

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Moments later and a few pounds heavier apiece, Manx and Caelyx mounted the garden's outer wall. Watching Manx's ascent, Caelyx found her gaze lingering on her childhood companion's tight, round posterior through the thin material of his breeches, and her heart jumped again in her chest. Visions of his angelic imp's face looking up at her as she held him down on the treasure room floor sent little jolts down her spine. With an angry shake of her head she banished these visions. This was Pshawri! Stupid old Pshawri! She continued her climb.

At the top of the wall, Manx was crouched low and peering left down the street at a dark, deepset doorway. He chin-pointed

that way as Caelyx joined him. "See you lurkers there? And surely that fat one is Myllic, the wine merchant's chief bully."

But Caelyx was looking right, toward the shadowed mouth of an alley. "Skulkers. And the scrawny one's Cluri, my employer's watchman. And armed to the teeth too."

"All waiting for us?"

"Mmm. It seems our boss' duplicitousness does not stop with each other after all."

Manx sighed. "Ah well, we'll just have to hold our auction on the open market."

Caelyx scowled comically. "For shame, Pshawri - sorry - Manx. We have sworn to deliver this blade to our employers, and deliver we shall. To both."

Manx chuckled as he caught her drift. "I came by roof-route which I have mapped in my head. What say we leave these groundlings and retire to the Silver Eel for wine and plotting?"

"Not the Golden Lamprey?" Asked Caelyx.

"Or the Lamprey. Whichever you prefer."

And with that, the two shadows that had been puzzling both Myllic's lurkers and Cluri's skulkers vanished roofward from the wall like smoke ghosts, leaving both groups to wait all the long hours of the Lankhmar night before returning at dawn to their respective bosses with disappointing reports.

CHAPTER THREE

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THE PRICE OF PAIN EASE

On the Street of the Gods, in the recently abandoned and as yet not re-let temple of one Utkā the Incorporeal - God of Non-Being, whose followers believed that one must strive through many incarnations to reach a state of perfect nothingness, primarily by giving all one's possessions to the temple, and whose priests had taken non-being to its most logical conclusion by disappearing from Lankhmar last week with all their follower's aforementioned possessions - the blood red light of a late Lankhmar afternoon slanted through narrow, glazed windows, dimly illuminating the floor of an utterly stripped room. The only furnishing that remained was a broken three-legged stool

draped with a length of rumpled muslin.

From the shadows of the gilt-edged and elaborately arched rafters - the only golden decor the priests couldn't reach - came the rustlings and twitterings of rats and pigeons, and the more silent shiftings of two larger creatures who watched with interest the drama unfolding below them.

Ten minutes ago, the principal members of Lankhmar's Benevolent Brotherhood of Wine Importers had pushed cautiously through the heavy wooden doors, expecting to rendezvous with their hired thief. They had brought their bullies along so that they might accomplish what they had failed at earlier, but upon finding no-one there, they had grumbled amongst themselves about the untimeliness of freelancers and settled in to wait.

Five minutes ago, the chief guildmasters of Lankhmar's Ancient and August Fraternity of Vintners and Arbor Keepers had arrived with their bullies expecting to meet their hired thief.

Four minutes ago, things had begun to get interesting.

At first, the two groups just stared at each other, astounded by the appearance of the very rivals they had intended to doom with the dagger they were here to collect. Then the brighter minds of both organizations started to grasp for excuses, however frail, to explain their presence.

Suviche, master bottler of the Vintners, was first with

inspiration. "Dearest brethren of the grape," he cooed. "What a delight to see you here, though it seems you too have been misinformed. We were told that this temple had been reconsecrated to Vashaiya of the Vine, our beloved goddess of the first blush, and had come to pray for the bounty of our vineyards. Alas, it appears we have come too early."

Now, it would have been simplicity itself for Zoftro, chief taster and buyer of the Brotherhood of Importers, to play into Suviche's lie and agree that they too had been misinformed, allowing each to bow out gracefully, but something in Suviche's voice and the set of his purple pudding face wouldn't let Zoftro demure. Even the smell of this fat potentate of potables and his grasping monopolists disgusted him.

"Me thinks you come too late, Suviche, for no prayers will save this year's Lankhmar vintage, which has been cursed with dry heat when it needed rain and with wet weather when it needed the sun. In fact, if you do pray here, which I sorely doubt, it is because you know our cellars across the Inner Sea are overflowing and ready to drown your wine shop monopoly in rich gold Sarheenmar wine."

Though Suviche seethed at this threat, there were still politic words he could have spoken that would have let both parties walk away unbloodied and with honor intact. And indeed,

he started to say them. "Dear friends, we have no monopoly. We welcome competition." But suddenly it was as though all the layers of gentility and tact he had carefully veneered over the venal avarice that was his soul were peeled away in one thrilling surge of freedom. At last he would speak his mind! At last he would give this upstart, Zoftro, with his wattled neck and red, testicular nose the dressing down he so richly deserved. "It's no fault of ours that we have none - that the discerning tavern goers of Lankhmar have no taste for your Sarheenmar urine!"

A red mist clouded Zoftro's vision. "Urine? You dare? You're Lankhmar piddle is but the liquid vomit of a diseased raisin!"

Now they were all shouting at once, an adenoidal braying like spaniels gone feral. And underneath this screechy clamor, felt but unheard, a high keening wail like a nestling vulture mewling for mother's scavengings.

From their lofty perch, Caelyx and Manx grinned at each other. What a glorious revenge! Manx in his exuberance clapped Caelyx on the back and nearly dislodged her from her roost, but he grabbed her hand as she flailed, and pulled her back. It took longer than necessary for them to unclasp hands. Their matching blushes were thankfully hidden by the dimness of their hiding

place, and quickly forgotten as their attention was again drawn below.

On the temple floor Suviche was screaming, "It is you who will drown, barterer! Not in precious Lankhmar sup, but in your own blood!" That was the flashpoint. Blades scraped from scabbards and bullies and guildmasters alike flew at each other, red, inhuman fury burning in their eyes. The high keening filled the whole temple, seeming to come from the very walls. To the combatants it was the echo of their own hate, but Caelyx and Manx knew it for what it was and their grins froze into rictus grimaces at the sound.

In the heart of the melee, a bully stumbled back with blood in his eyes and knocked fat old Suviche over the three legged stool. Suviche barely noticed the knock and was on his feet again instantly, howling for a weapon. And lo, one had come to hand.

The dirty muslin that had covered the stool had been pulled aside by his fall, revealing a naked dagger, a dagger with a black pearl pommel and a red vein snaking almost to its tip. Suviche snatched it up, his battle-frenzied mind not even registering that this was the dagger he had come for, and plunged it into his nearest foe.

Now the dagger's keening, which had until now been a wail

of desperate want, became a howl of ecstasy, a scream of orgasm! Suviche's victim, Enstelt, the importers' chief accountant, gaped at the wound and shrieked in sheerest terror, as if more than his body had been punctured.

The dagger moaned. The ruby vein glowed like the crawling embered edge of burning wood, and the plum-sized pommel heart pulsed red at its core, and redder still. Suviche tried to pull the dagger free for another thrust, but it refused. It seemed to grip Enstelt's tissues from the inside, and squirmed in Suviche's hand as it burrowed deeper.

Caelyx and Manx stared, mesmerized, as a terrible change began to occur in Enstelt. It was as if he had become the very grape his colleagues traded in, a grape left to dry and becoming raisin in a matter of seconds rather than weeks. For like a raisin, his flesh began to shrink inside his skin, and his skin to darken and wrinkle and fold in on itself until his bones stuck out like the roof poles of a leathern Mingol tent, and his face became a grooved and flaking mask. But most horrible of all was that, even as his eyeballs withered in their sockets like snake-sucked eggs, he still screamed! It was as if even death was not enough to free him from his agony.

Only when Zoftro brained Suviche with the stool, knocking him aside, did the dagger release its grip and allow Zoftro to

remove it. No blood seeped from Enstelt's wound as Zoftro stabbed Suviche. No blood at all.

Any triumph Caelyx and Manx felt at the success of their revenge was gone, replaced by sick horror. This was beyond anything they would have wished on their direst enemies, let alone these plodding plotters and stumble-bum bravos. They'd wanted to see a little blood and slapstick and to teach these connivers that even freelance thieves must be dealt with honestly, but this, this was a nightmare.

Unable to tear their eyes away, they watched the knife pass from hand to hand, switching sides more often than a professional spy, and drink its fill each time. Its shriek was now all encompassing, a deep sea pressure on the ears, body and soul. Thoughts fragmented and lost each other in that forest of sound. Twisted, desiccated corpses were scattered around the temple like so much kindling.

Manx's eyes flared. He grabbed Caelyx's wrist. "What have you done? This madness is your doing!"

"Blame me? You were all for it! Leave off!"

She jerked her arm away and swiped at him. He leaned back to avoid her fist and they both overbalanced. They snatched desperately at the rafters and caught themselves by fingernail and toe-tip, paling at the nearness of the thing.

Manx swallowed. "The dagger's influence spreads. We must go!"

Caelyx nodded, fearful of what venom she might spit if she spoke. She righted herself and, with furious caution, they crabbed across the rafters and out the broken stained-glass rosette by which they had earlier entered. Behind them, the dagger continued its orgy of blood and its cry followed them across the rooves.

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A short time later, as the red of afternoon deepened into the bruised purple of evening, the two young adventurers recovered their breath and wits 'gainst chimneys on the steep pitch of a gabled tenement equidistant from the Golden Lamprey and the Silver Eel. It was a moment before either could shake the hideous images that clung to their minds, but finally their shivering stopped and they looked up at each other and realized they had a decision to make. Though both were as at home on the slants and shingles of rooves as most ordinary citizens of Lankhmar were on cobbles and mud, their postures suddenly became uncertain and uneasy.

Caelyx was first to speak.

"So, off to the Eel?"

Manx nodded. "I've my digs near there. Uh, you..." He paused and seemed to change his question. "You're for the Lamprey?"

"No, home I think. I'm in no mood for loud companions, though..." She frowned. "Well, just home."

There was an awkward silence which Manx rushed to fill. "The words I spoke back there, I didn't..."

Caelyx shrugged. "It was the dagger. You saved me right before, remember?"

The memory of how long it had taken them to unclasp hands sent twin blushes to their faces. Suddenly they were looking anywhere but at each other.

"Well, I..."

"Do you...?"

"You first."

"No, you."

Manx flushed even deeper. "I... I was just going to ask if... you always work alone."

"Always." Said Caelyx automatically then, realizing what the question meant, "That is, I am trying to make a name for myself. A partner would only confuse..."

"Oh absolutely!" blurted Manx. "I'm a lone wolf myself. I mean, what's the point? You only have to split the loot."

"Right."

"Right."

This time the silence fell in earnest, as each tried to work up the courage to speak their hearts, and failed. Finally Caelyx's embarrassment turned to anger. "Well, I can't stand here all night." She turned homeward

"Uh, me neither." Agreed Manx. "Things to do."

He turned, then turned back. "You... You can find me at the Eel, most nights."

"Then you'll never find me at the Lamprey, will you?" Said Caelyx, cold. And with that, leapt off the roof.

Manx glared after her for a long second, then, with a wounded snort, leapt a narrow alley, landed on the flat roof of a low building, and padded off into the deepening shadows of the Lankhmar night.

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At the Sea Wrack, a month or so later, Fafhrd and Mouser were laughing over letters delivered that morning by way of a Tovilvis bartering barge. Cif and Afreyt were with them, reading over their shoulders.

"So, they've met and survived the encounter," chuckled Fafhrd.

"And developed fond opinions of each other, if Pshawri's letter is any judge," added Mouser.

"What? Oh, sarcasm, yes," said Fafhrd. "Much love here as well. Let's have yours, then."

Mouser raised a tankard. "A moment whilst I wet my lips and find the telling passage. Ah, here. He writes, 'Despite changing her name, Caelyx remains the snooty princess brat she played at back home. Though resourceful in battle and quick with plots and deceptions like all women, she seems not a thief for the art of it, but for the fame she can make. She could make better use of her skills as a courtesan-bodyguard to some lord with a fetish for height.'"

"The boy slings darts like his father," laughed Fafhrd. "But Fingers - rather Caelyx - I suppose I'll get used to it - has a few barbs of her own. Pray listen." He squinted at the curling script and began. "Pshawri's here and fairs well enough, I suppose. But to my mind he lacks the imagination that makes a truly great thief. Oh, he knows his locks and climbs with some grace, but he has no flair. A thousand leagues away he's still walking in his father's shadow. He's even taken a new name, 'Manx,' if you can believe it. He might as well have called himself 'Black Ratter!'"

Mouser glared. The girl wasn't throwing darts, but

brickbats. "Ill speaking minx! I'll box her ears for her."

"Come, Mouser," chided Fafhrd. "We've said worse of each other many a time."

"I think they're in love," broke in Afreyt.

The two captains looked up.

"What?" laughed Fafhrd.

"These are the words of love?" sneered Mouser.

Cif smiled. "My sister speaks right. I'll wager a week's rent on your barracks they've already bedded each other."

Faf and Mou, being sportsmen of old, nearly sprung at the bet, but then considered more closely. A week's rent was no small sum.

"Hmmm," said Fafhrd, rereading both letters. "Mayhap you're right. They do protest a mite too much."

The Mouser smiled, "Still I'll take your wager, for if they're truly blood of our blood, then they're stubborn and won't let even their loins change their minds."

"A trait they inherited from you?" Cif scoffed. "It's not one I've encountered."

Fafhrd and Afreyt laughed along with Cif, and even Mouser was persuaded to smile.

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Back in Lankhmar, and back in time, the morning after Caelyx and Manx's unhappy vengeance, Manx awoke in his stuffy garret with his arm gone dead, pinned 'neath a muscular back. He eyed his bed companion warily. In the dim morning light, the tall northern girl, with her red hair, brawny arms and plump breasts looked almost right, but though she had been an eager and exhausting bedmate, he was not content. Instead he felt only emptiness and regret. As ardent as the girl had been, and as tall and as strong, she lacked something. Sharpness? Haughtiness? Green eyes?

Manx sighed and tried to discover a way of sliding his arm out without waking her. He slid an inch, another, then...

"Hmmm? Oh ho! Morning, little giant killer. Fancy another round then?"

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Caelyx rolled over in her narrow cot and got an elbow in the eye. She woke with a curse and nearly lashed out before she remembered that she had invited this intruder. She looked down at his slumbering form. With his brown skin, tight, compact body and sly, angelic face, he looked nearly right. But he was all wrong.

Oh, he had been a passionate and inventive lover, but it

was the passion of the actor and the inventiveness of the whore. And that sly smile was missing something. Honesty? Kindness? A pug nose?

She lay back, feeling hollow and unfulfilled, and drifted slowly back into unhappy unconsciousness. When she awoke again later, the brown boy was gone, and so was her purse.

THE END