

PROLOGUE

Grover wasn't normally suspended from the ceiling naked, nor was he commonly to be found suspended from the ceiling clothed. He just wasn't commonly known to be suspended from anything, clothed or unclothed--except of course for the occasional chandelier, and then not for long. Rather, Grover was known about Jolinstive, and the province, as a man who stood firmly on his two sandaled feet. Not the type of guy that would casually hang from the ceiling, just because he was in the mood to. But at the time he didn't feel as if he had much choice. He was willing to go along with almost anything to solve his ...ur . . problem.

Grover's heavily muscled body was tied securely to the thick wooden beams that crossed the ceiling. Large black straps of leather held his body firmly against the pressures of gravity. Each wrist was cuffed snugly, with a large buckle that was pulled tight. At each ankle there was a similar device, also pulled tight. The thickest leather straps went across his massive chest, his taut stomach, and his mammoth thighs, all to hold him in while the treatment took place.

It was hot up by the ceiling, being that it was the height of the summertime, and being that heat rose. Grover shifted uncomfortably in the straps, totally unable to wipe his brow that was beaded with sweat. The beads formed right above his eyes, slid down his nose, just above his lip, hung there for a second, and then fell to the ground. He wasn't used to being held in bonds, even with his consent. He wasn't a prisoner, though, except as one might see it from social circumstances – he would never be the dancer that his inner soul craved –instead he was reluctant patient in a new form of therapy. Actually the

word therapy was a bit generous. Torture was more like it. A young, probably unlicensed, wizard had proposed it as a sure thing treatment. That's what Ragnar, his brother, had told him anyway.

"Now, how does that feel, my little poopy bear?" Mirelda asked, slightly tickling Grover's inner thigh with a long goose feather.

"Please don't call me that," Grover said, forcing out the words.

"Awww," Mirelda said. "But you are my poopy bear," As she said this, she manipulated the feather farther up Grover's thigh, slowly stroking back and forth. "Now, how does that feel?"

"It feels ..." Grover caught his breath when a new sensation ran up his body. "It feels fine."

He took another breath "How ...How much longer must I stay up here ?"

"Like that nice young wizard said ..." Mirelda disappeared under his huge body, until she stood below his waist. "Not until you learn to relax. He said you can't perform when you're all tense."

Grover felt a cool hand slide along his stomach, coming closer to his . . .

"This is such a damned treatment." Grover squirmed in his straps. "I shouldn't have ..."

"Now, what did he say about getting angry?" Mirelda asked,

"Not to," Grover said. "But this seems a little much, even for the circumstances. Given a few more days, I'll feel the fire and ..."

Mirelda appeared by his face, looking rather like his mother. Why had he married this woman? Had it been love? Had it been her huge dowry? The political possibilities?

Or because he'd been caught with his trousers down in front of witnesses? Yeah, that might have been it. Those damn loose trousers of his.

"You know we've tried almost everything and then some," she reminded him.

"But maybe ... maybe it isn't my fault."

Mirelda's face grew tight and she hissed, "We know whose fault it is."

Then her eyes grew wide and she stared down the length of Grover's body.

"Awwww, and we were doing so well. Did I scare him away?"

Grover felt the feather back to his thigh. Mirelda began to ply him with long, slow strokes, all along murmuring, "Just relax now, just relax and let Mommy take care of everything."

Grover just grunted.

Through the observation peephole, Ragnar turned back to his friend Osteleis. They were both dressed in the cutting edge of noble finery for the summer: loose flowing white blouses and billowy pants, with a red sash about the waist, looking rather like the pirates that founded Jolinstive two centuries earlier and whose blood still ran through their veins. Ragnar's blood, however, was rather diluted. Effeminate and pale, he was nothing like his muscular brother, Grover. Osteleis was slightly larger, but not Grover's equal either.

"What do you say Osteleis, do you think we will have an heir in a month?"

Osteleis went back to the cork-sized hole drilled into the wooden siding of the wall, and looked through to see Mirelda lowering Grover from the straps. "It's hard to tell. He has failed pretty much so far. I think it would be bad luck to bet against him, though."

"Then you will bet for him?" Ragnar asked, a gleam in his eye.

"Aye," Osteleis said, falling into the same trap that all of Ragnar's other friends had fallen into. But Osteleis thought he was the wiser because he had observed that Grover was looking more promising by the minute. "Aye, and I'll put five ...five silver sovereigns on it."

"Five?" Ragnar paced the little anteroom from which he often spied on his brother. "Five. You know it is difficult to bet against one's own brother?"

Osteleis turned from the peephole. "Well, if it bothers you, we can bet on how soon it will happen."

Ragnar held up one jeweled hand. On each finger was a large gold ring with some sort of valuable jewel. He had purchased none of them, but had gained them by wit and enterprise (translation: deceit and theft). "But on the other band, I will win if my brother wins and win if my brother loses. Thus it is a bet I cannot lose. Some say it is a wise bet, for even in losing I win."

"For your house will have an heir."

"A legitimate heir," Ragnar corrected.

"So do we have a bet?" Osteleis asked eagerly.

Ragnar waited a moment before responding, building up the suspense. "Ten silver sovereigns.

"Ten!" Osteleis exclaimed. He then peeked back through the peephole and saw that things were looking up, so to speak. It seemed like a safe bet. With ten more sovereigns he could purchase that excellent new rapier he had been lusting after. The one with balance he could kill for ... and kill with. With that rapier he would surely become

the most notorious gentleman-class dueler in all of Jolinstive. "Ten it is, then. And do we bet on an heir or on individual performance?"

"One would think a successful performance would bring an heir," Ragnar said, wiping the sweat from his brow with a silk, monogrammed kerchief. "Dreadfully hot in here."

"Yes," Osteleis agreed. "Then it is on performance?"

Ragnar walked over to the small table set against the wall of the room, where sat a basin of water and a bottle of chilled wine. He splashed some water on his face and then looked up. "We shall make two bets, then. One on performance and one on an heir."

Osteleis waited. His hands caressed the coins in his purse. The last coins of his monthly allowance.

Ragnar dried his face. "We will do the ten sovereigns on performance and, say, forty sovereigns on an heir."

"Forty," Osteleis repeated. If he lost, that would take a big bite out of his next month's allowance, but-if he won, he could afford the rapier and the company of a certain wench he had been lusting after. He licked his lips. "A male heir?"

"What else?"

Osteleis looked through the peep-hole once again. What he saw perked up his courage. "Done. Ten on performance. Forty on the heir." He smiled. He would have the rapier, the woman, and would have beaten Ragnar for once. "I hope we both win."

"So do I," Ragnar said with no emotion.

There was a knocking at the door and Ragnar glanced at Osteleis and then went to answer it. It was a servant, by the name of Urvis, reporting that he had the herbs that he

had been sent for. He complained that the cliffs were getting more treacherous every day. Ragnar replied that's what he was paid for, to stop complaining and sent him off with a curt slap.

"Herbs?" Osteleis asked, arching an eyebrow. He had earlier suspected Ragnar of poisoning one of his friends who hadn't paid a debt.

"I have a small ailment," Ragnar explained.

Osteleis nodded. The sweat started to pour down his brow.

"How are they doing?" Ragnar asked.

"Damn it all to hell and back," Grover exploded, slamming the headboard. There was an audible crack. "Not again."

Mirelda leaned over Grover's waist and cooed, "Awww, my poor baby. Did I frighten you?"

"Will you stop talking ... talking to it ... as if it were another person?" Grover asked. "I'm up here."

"I'm just trying to help." Mirelda pouted.

"Nothing you have done has helped," Grover said, rolling over and getting off the bed. He reached for his slightly out-of-fashion white breeches and white blouse. "I knew this wouldn't work. It's too damn ... too damn weird."

"But we were doing so well."

Grover looked back at Mirelda as she lay on her side, full body exposed. The same fifteen-year-old body he had been caught with not six months ago, and now he couldn't ... he couldn't even "We'll try again later."

"But ..." Mirelda protested.

"Later," Grover said firmly, thrusting on his pants. He pulled his shirt on and walked to the door. He looked out in the sunlit hallway. "Maybe after practice I'll feel up to it."

Grover wasn't the only one disappointed with his bedroom performance that day. Osteleis would have claimed he was even more so, as he handed over the five silver sovereigns one after the other.

"Only five?" Ragnar asked.

"I don't have ten now. I'll have to give you the rest later. When I get my next allowance. Damned luck, you know?"

Ragnar palmed the money, considered, and licked his lips. "That will do ... For now."

Osteleis sighed and put a hand to Ragnar's shoulder. "You're a good man. I'm sorry that he wasn't able to perform. I know how you like your brother and want the best for him. Maybe next time."

"Yes, maybe," Ragnar agreed. "There's always a chance."

"There is," Osteleis insisted

"And I hope I have to pay you that forty sovereigns soon."

"So do I," Osteleis said, and then noticed the sun was lower. "I must be going. I'll get the money to you soon."

Ragnar nodded.

Osteleis looked at him for some clue of his intentions, but could see none. He just thought it might be a good idea to get that money real soon.

Ragnar watched silently as Osteleis walked out of the secret anteroom. When he was gone, he walked back over to the peephole, saw Mirelda lying seductively on the bed, and he smiled ever so slightly.

On the far side of the chateau - the side facing the mountain - Grover walked out to the practice yard, located in a secluded part of the garden. His dueling second Cataract, named after his father's eye disease, was already there, stretching; preparing himself for practice. Grover found a clear space in the field and stretched also. When they were done, Grover picked out his favorite rapier and did a few preparatory thrusts through the air. His second did likewise, and without any outward signal they commenced dueling. Their rapiers met in a flash of sun and steel, caressing each other lightly, then falling away. From afar, one could only see sparks of light, like stars, disappearing and reappearing rapidly, so as to dazzle the eye.

"So how is the dueling schedule this week?" Grover asked, catching his second's blade.

"Only two duels, Grover," Cataract said. He pulled away and launched a new attack.

Grover parried. "Who with?"

Both men drew apart and considered strategy.

"One with Darleck Quintain. He's new. A rookie. Wants to make a big splash. I've seen him duel. You should have no trouble. He likes to lunge."

Grover nodded, and they circled each other, looking for an opening.

"And the other?"

"An unknown. Name's Raven, or something. A maverick."

"Does anyone know him?"

"No, he's one of those that go from town to town."

Grover nodded, then renewed his attack. He felt slightly fatigued from his bout with Mirelda, but wasn't so tired that he couldn't put his second on the run. Grover wasn't exactly a great duelist, but neither was his second, whose main job was to make sure Grover didn't embarrass himself in public. Grover quickly pressed through his second's defense. In a moment, it was over. His blade against his second's neck.

"Damn," the second said. "You won again."

"It takes practice."

"Yes, but you won."

Grover glared at Cataract and picked up a rag to wipe his rapier off with.

"Aren't we going to duel again?" the second asked.

Grover shook his head.

"Treatment didn't work, huh?"

Grover stood up straight, shouted, "God, does everybody know?"

"You told me," Cataract said.

"Oh, yeah. That's right."

Grover continued cleaning his blade. The servant watched him for a second, thinking; then walked over. "There's a place I know. A place where they have herbs that can help you."

Grover glanced up. His free hand unconsciously sank towards his thigh.

"Tell me where."

Later in the evening, Grover found himself alone on the chateau porch that overlooked the greater part of Jolinstive, one of the most active port cities in all of the Vardan Empire. It was a thriving city, full of trade, sport and politics. One might have said that Jolinstive's most famous sport was politics, with everyone having an opinion, or at least leasing one and then betting on the outcome no matter what the stakes. Betting was the second favorite sport; the one in which any person could play. Only the richest of families could afford to actively participate in the sport of politics.

But Grover wasn't thinking of this, nor was he thinking of the four-course dinner he had just gorged with his brother. Neither did he give a thought to his two sisters, both recently married in good political matches. Their husbands were of fine material and Grover had no complaint. But what he was thinking of at the moment was the same thing he had been thinking of ever since it happened. The problem. A certain problem, that was the most embarrassing problem a virile male with a pulse could have. A problem he had never experienced until it was absolutely necessary for him not to have this ... ur ... problem. And he was embarrassed to talk of it, not letting anyone know beyond his wife, his brother, his dueling second, a few fraternity brothers, the bartender at the local pub and a small crowd of onlookers on one drunken night. In short, he was discrete and a man of few words but larger hand gestures.

"Fine night," Ragnar said, walking to the carved wooden railing of the porch, where Grover hung his hulking frame.

"Yes," Grover said, not looking at his brother.

Ragnar leaned on the rail beside him, a crystal glass of wine in his hand. "They say the Quintains are going to run again. I give them a nine-in-ten chance of winning unless the Suaper family gets involved. That would be a contest. What do you think?"

"It's possible," Grover said. "One never knows ..." His words drifted away into the coolness of the evening.

Ragnar noted this and chose a different subject. "The emperor is planning to replace the governor in Flann. If Quintain takes that, they it's really open grabs for anyone in the election. But what I think ..."

Grover backed away from the railing. "Really, I don't wish to discuss politics."

Ragnar nodded. "As you wish. Do you care for some wine?"

Grover sighed.

Ragnar said. "I'm sorry. You're still worried that the wine may be affecting your ... you know?"

Grover shifted uncomfortably.

"And what's it been now? Two, three weeks now and no change."

"Four."

"How did the treatment Alides proposed go?" Ragnar asked. "He really is a promising young wizard."

Grover turned swiftly. "That man's a sadist."

"So no pop goes the weasel then?"

"No," Grover said, glumly.

"Sill think it's Mirelda's fault?"

"That girl scares me. She likes pain. My pain."

"That's what you get for marrying the daughter of the most powerful political family in Jolinstive."

"I didn't have much choice."

Ragnar nodded, took a sip from his wine; regarded his brother.

Grover smashed one fist into the other. "It's such a damned requirement that I have to produce an heir before I receive my inheritance."

"It's only for safety's sake," Ragnar said. "If you-"

"Spare me the speech," Grover said, knowing how well his brother loved to speak. "I know why. What I don't understand is why now, why now of all times."

"Performance anxiety," Ragnar said. "It can afflict-"

"It's not performance anxiety. It's like riding a bike."

"A what?"

"A bike. It hasn't been invented yet. Once you learn how to-"

"Stop," Ragnar said. "I get the picture."

"And none of the treatments have worked. Not one. It's like you're deliberately sabotaging me."

Ragnar choked on his wine.

Grover patted him on the back.

"Wrong pipe," Ragnar said, spitting out some wine. He took a few deep breaths and the color, what little he had, returned to his face. "You still have a month and a half."

"A month and a half, and if I got her pregnant tonight, we would just know by then. It's too short a time. Too short." He looked at Ragnar. "It's not that I want to have the inheritance, you know. I'd let you have it ..."

"Would you?" Ragnar inquired, carefully masking his enthusiasm. "All of it? The six hundred thousand sovereigns. The house. The titles. The seat on the merchants' board? Everything?"

"Why, yes," Grover said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You're my brother, after all. Family. I would do anything for you."

"Of course," Ragnar said. "I would do the same to ... for you."

"It's just that I don't want this to be a permanent, uh, condition."

"I see," Ragnar said. "So what do you propose to do?"

"I heard the open air is good," Grover said.

"Not campaigning?" Ragnar asked. "They say that battle is only a substitute for the sensual pleasures, and that your sword is only a substitute for your ..."

Grover's face became hard.

"Maybe you should give up the sword," Ragnar proposed.

"Dueling?" Grover asked in surprise. "Never. Never."

"I've done all that I can to ..., I mean, for you," Ragnar said. "I've gathered the herbs, asked the physicians, and contacted wizards for you, all the while not disclosing your name or favorite sexual position. I've done all this for you. I even tried to get an extension on the time. But you know how Jolinstitute lawyers are. I've done all a brother can do, except ...except, uh, you know."

Ragnar made grinding motions with his hips, aware that sometimes his brother didn't understand sub-text. Hell, sometimes he didn't understand text.

Grover nodded. He turned suddenly, decisively, and walked over to his brother.

Ragnar saw Grover coming toward him, noticed his proximity to the railing, to a certain death from gravity and trembled. And then Grover's hands were heavy upon him, gripping his shoulders and pulling him close.

"You're not going to kiss me, are you?"

"No, it hasn't come to that," Grover said. "Not yet."

Ragnar nodded, feeling lucky to have escaped, and then worried by what Grover meant by 'not yet?'

Grover smiled broadly, as if reading his mind, then patted him on the shoulders and walked away. Ragnar watched him go, and when he was gone, noticed that he had spilled red wine all down his white pants leg, leaving a long red stain that looked rather like a wound.

A HERO FOR A KITTEN

Parda was established in the year 1043 in the Vardan Empire, year 6 of the Emperor Thialan, whose chief claim to fame was that incident with the goat. Parda lies twenty or so leagues west of Jolinstive, and is chiefly known for its pursuit of the game of marbles. The game used to be for children, but evolved into a pastime for adults who naturally attached the practice of betting to the outcome of the games, as well as the trajectory of the marbles, and uncommon occurrences such as tornado-force winds, earthquakes and amphibian invasions. It was a 10,000-to-1 return on an amphibian invasion upsetting a game, being that there weren't many amphibians around. Most of the bets were paid in ale, because pubs and temples provided most areas of play, but in less common circumstances -the bets were paid off in sovereigns.

Grover knew little about this as he walked into the thriving little town. Parda was nothing remarkable, just a small metropolis consisting of a mere five temples, magistrate's office, several shoppes, ruins, magic caves, mystic peaks, haunted houses and a few homes in the immediate vicinity around the ancient alien temple complex. The spaces between the buildings were unpaved dirt, which was packed down after the spring rains, and which turned into a dry choking dust that rose up with each passage of a sandaled foot.

Grover's manservant, Stanley, had preceded him into town to set up accommodations for the evening, because it had been a tough overland journey, and Grover wasn't planning to leave right away. He was still troubled with his ...you know, and he had decided to take the advice of his dueling second and seek out a certain apothecary's shoppe, which was rumored to be useful to men with a certain ... uh, you

know ... predisposition . He had told his brother that he was going hunting and that he would return soon. He had lied. He didn't want his brother to know what he was up to, because his brother would become upset that Grover didn't trust his judgment. As he saw it, he had only ten days to resolve his situation and do his husbandly duty so he could gain the inheritance. And that was counting it close. Not that he was counting. Much.

Walking into town, he had no notion of where the apothecary's shoppe was. Being embarrassed by the nature of the problem, he didn't ask anyone, and instead trod back and forth across the town looking here and there, while the inhabitants looked him up and down and followed him with a long, lingering stare. Maybe they can tell, he thought, and squirmed uncomfortably.

After walking about for more than an hour and seeing no sign that said "Apothecary's Shoppe," "This way to the Apothecary's Shoppe" or "If you had an Apothecary's Shoppe you would be there right now," he decided to ask a middle-aged woman who was selling vegetables in the town market.

"Goat day," Grover said, following the custom of the area.

The woman stopped what she was doing, looked up from her pile of avocados to gaze at Grover's tanned, well-muscled physique, which showed plainly through his light white blouse.

"Looking for apothecary's shoppe?"

Grover stiffened and said quickly, "It's for a friend."

The woman nodded knowingly and smiled, "It's right behind you." She pointed a darkly tanned arm and Grover turned.

He saw the shoppe, wondering how he could have passed it before. There was a sign painted in bright red that boldly stated, "All Things Perverted: A Fine Apothecary's Shoppe. Even My Mom Said So." In the window were various painted signs telling of the curatives and potions inside: "Cure Warts--Social Disease-Bad Breath--Gain Friends--Lose Friends-Poisons-And More." And at the bottom it stated, "Impotence Is Our Specialty. Get a Preferred Customer Card. That means you." Grover winced and then turned back to the woman. "Thank you."

She just smiled and nodded.

Grover crossed the street to the apothecary's shoppe, looking both ways to see if anyone was watching him. He saw no one in particular taking any special notice, except for a small, ragged boy of about eight or ten years, sitting in the shade of the shoppe. He shifted marbles slowly from hand to hand, scrutinizing Grover as he approached. Grover ignored him and strode swiftly, but not swiftly enough to attract notice, to the shoppe. The sooner he was in, the better. The sooner he had the herbs, the sooner his problem would be gone, and this nightmare of an inheritance would be over.

Grover reached for the brass doorknob.

"It's closed, sir."

Grover looked down and saw the ragged boy. "What?"

"It's closed."

Grover twisted the knob and felt the resistance that indicated it was locked.

"Closed, but I need ... How long is it closed for? When was it closed? You see I need something for my ... Do you know when it's going to be open again?"

"Don't worry," the boy said easily, a smile on his face. "He only closed up for lunch."

Grover relaxed, wiped the sweat from his brow. "When will the apothecary be back?"

The boy shrugged. "Who knows?"

"I don't," Grover said. "That's why I asked you"

"Oh," the boy said. "If you're in such a hurry to find him, I can tell you where he is."

Grover waited. The boy said nothing. "You can tell me now."

"Oh," the boy said. "Yes. Right. He's down at the pub playing with his marbles."

"Is that a reference to his-"

"No, what kind of boy do you think I am?"

"I didn't think-"

"Exactly," the boy said. "This book is for young adults and we don't need talk like that. Next think you'll be asking me to sit on your lap-"

"Okay, all right," Grover said. "I'm sorry."

"You will be."

"What?"

"Nothing," the boy said, pocketing his knife.

"So which pub?"

"There's only one," the boy said.

"I can't find anything in this da- ... in this town. I don't even know where my servant is." Grover looked over the ragged boy. The raggedness was only a pose. His clothes were just dusty. This was no street urchin. "Can you show me where it is?"

"Sure," the boy said, rising to his feet. "For a price."

Grover considered how lost he got the first time, and how urgent it was to solve his problem, carried the nine and still got confused. With little hesitation, he pulled out a drachma.

"Not so fast," the boy said.

Grover pulled out the coin slower.

"You haven't been here before, have you? You don't pay for things, you play for things. If you win I guide you for free, and if I win I get your soul."

"What?"

"I get double," the boy said.

"Oh, yes, of course," Grover said, eyeing the boy suspiciously. "So what do we play?"

"Marbles," the boy explained, getting to his knees.

"Marbles," Grover repeated.

"Yeah, marbles," the boy said, drawing a circle in the dirt with a diameter of about ten feet.

"But I didn't bring any," Grover mumbled, slowly lowering his bulk.

The boy eyed him. "I could see that."

It took a moment for Grover to realize he had been insulted.

"I have an extra set," the boy explained.

“What kind of freak of nature are you?” Grover asked.

Then the boy poured out some marbles and Grover realized his mistake. The game was simple. The first person to pitch a marble closest to the lag line went first. With Grover’s amazing athletic skill he went second. The boy then quickly placed thirteen marbles in the center of the circle and went to work. No sooner had the boy began, then seven marbles had been knocked out. Grover didn’t even get a turn.

"Not bad," the boy said, picking up the marbles.

“But I lost.”

“For me,” the boy explained.

Grover handed over two drachmas.

The boy secreted the coins and marbles in his garments, then walked away. Grover dusted himself off and followed casually, shortening his pace to accommodate the boy's. In a few short moments he was at the only pub in town, the Ragged Wyrn.

"This is it," the boy declared. "The apothecary should be in there. His name is Sujeck. He should be drinking, or playing marbles at one of the tables, or both. The proprietor's name is Dansk, like it says on the sign."

Grover looked up at the sign, which had a picture of a Wyrn that looked pretty limp. The slogan below the sign said, "There's Only One Way to Cure the Wyrn," Below that was the owner's name.

"Are you sure he's here?"

The boy shrugged. "He could be anywhere. That is, of course, if you believe in what Kinskay's been saying in *The Transformation of Being*." -

Grover's face went blank.

“Philosophy,” the boy explained.

Grover scratched his head.

“Forget it,” the boy said and walked off.

Grover pushed through the weather-beaten wooden doors to enter a dimly lit, wretched-smelling room, filled with the sounds of laughter, eating, drinking, and marbles clinking. It took him a few moments to adjust his eyes, and when he did there was a man groveling in front of him. A rather portly man, with a dark grizzly beard, and long dark hair tied in a ponytail. He wore white trousers and shirt, which had stains from where he had been wiping his hands on them.

"Ah, you've finally arrived," the man said.

"Yes," Grover said cautiously.

"Someone said they saw you in town, but I wasn't sure."

"I see," Grover said, growing suspicious.

The man grinned wider, and took him by the arm, and felt his bicep. "What a muscle. God, you must be strong."

"Why, thank you," Grover said, who was rather proud of his physique.

The man laughed. "And polite too. All the better. Of course, we heard stories."

“What stories?” Grover asked, worried that everyone knew.

“Not about you. We only heard good stories about you. But about others. You know.”

“What did they say?”

The man put a greasy hand to his food-stained beard. "Nothing I care to repeat. They were all lies. Vicious lies. Didn't believe a one. Of course, stories circulate about heroes. Jealous people, villains making things up."

Grover nodded, wondering why the portly man was talking to him like this.

"But I'm just glad you're here. And that's what matters."

"Thanks," Grover said.

The man burst into laughter. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even bother to introduce myself. My name is Dansk, and this pub is my place. I'm sorry for the conditions but business has been bad lately. But that's why you're here. Now, would you like something to eat, drink, anything? A market investment portfolio perhaps?"

Grover considered. "I ... No, thank you ... I was looking for the apothecary."

"The apothecary? Why? Oh, but of course you have your reasons." Dansk nudged him knowingly. "Sly devil. You heroes."

Grover wondered if "Hero" could be a sly euphemism for his problem and frowned.

Dansk noticed Grover's frown and said, "But, I didn't mean to presume to know your business."

"My business," Grover said, wondering if that was a euphemism.

Dansk patted his sweating forehead with a towel. "Didn't mean to intrude. I understand you want everything hush-hush. But he isn't here right now."

Grover sighed. "Do you know where he is? I really needed to ...to consult with him."

"Of course, of course," Dansk said. "Consult. I understand. I'll send someone right away to find him." Dansk clapped his hands. "Illa. Illa."

A moment later, a young, attractive servant girl appeared, carrying a tray.

"Yes, Uncle," she said. Her eyes turned to Grover and grew large with amazement. She almost dropped the tray. "Is it?"

"Yes," he said hurriedly. "And he wants the apothecary. I want you to get him now. And be quick about it."

"Yes, yes, Uncle," she said, her eyes darting once again to Grover.

"Yes," she said once more, and ran out of the pub.

Grover watched her depart but didn't experience the same pull in the pocket, the same shake in the snake that he had before his problem had set in. He sighed inwardly and turned back to Dansk. "You really didn't have to send her. I could have gone for him myself. If I only had some good directions and-" .

"Don't think of it," Dansk said. "My Pleasure. After all, I'm only doing all I can to help you, since you're helping us. One hand washes the other, right?"

Grover studied his hands, trying to figure it out.

Dansk took Grover's arm and guided him over to a table. He brushed off the excess garbage with a dirty towel that made it barely clean. "There. My best table just for you."

"Best?"

"Second best. I had to reserve my best for ... you know?"

Grover shook his head. "No.

Dansk laughed when he saw Grover's serious face. "You jest?"

“About what?”

"Then you're not Hudo? Hudo the Hero?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"No," Grover said, shaking his head. "I just came looking for the apothecary."

“Then get away from my best table.”

“Second best,” Grover said.

“Whatever. "I thought you were him, and he isn't here, and it's almost time." He paced back and forth in front of the little table, and then stopped. "You're big, you're strong. You wouldn't consider helping me out, would you?"

Grover raised an eyebrow. "How?"

The man sat down at the table; plucking a chicken bone from under him and throwing it to the floor. "There is a man. An evil man." Dansk stopped and looked around and then went on in a whisper. "He has been terrorizing this town, and especially this pub, extracting movies, using our daughters ...I figured out this probably wasn't good for business. So I hired a hero to kill him, but he hasn't arrived. I need someone. For you see, I have to give the villain the money instead of the hero, and I can't afford it any longer, what, with the way the economy is these days. It's cheaper to pay the hero to get rid of the villain than to keep paying the villain. Business 101, right?"

Grover had no idea, but nodded anyway.

"Wrong. The hero didn't come in, the villain is on his way, and I can't afford to pay him. So I need you to act as a hero.”

“I see.”

“So will you do it?”

Grover nodded. "No.”

“Just a little bit?”

“I’m a duelist, not a hero. Not my specialty, you know?”

Dansk grunted. “I understand. But couldn't you branch out? Maybe you might like it.”

“Heroing is sweaty work.”

“I have towels.”

"Maybe your hero will come," Grover suggested.

“Is that your final offer?”

“I wasn’t offering anything.”

"Then seeing as how I need cash and you’re at my best table, would you order something to eat?"

"Okay," Grover said, and ordered a meal.

Dansk waddled back into the interior of the pub and Grover looked around the surrounding tables and noticed groups of men standing in twos or threes around huge square tables with circles drawn on them. Official marble playing tables, Grover thought.

The men were playing intently, talking amongst themselves about the marble games and the undead on the border. Occasionally one would glance over to Grover, nod to a friend, and they would both look and then say something. But no one approached him.

A few moments later there was a loud crashing at the front door, and a blue-cloaked figure stalked in carrying a large burlap sack that moved and made sounds. The man was tall, about as tall as Grover, but less bulky. He had his black hair tied in a ponytail and a swagger that said he wasn't afraid. One hand held the sack, and the other

rested on the head of a wicked-looking axe that hung from his belt. Grover wondered if this could be the hero.

"That's him," Dansk whispered in Grover's ear, after creepily sneaking up on him.

Grover jumped in his seat. "Who? The hero?" Grover asked.

Dansk set a frothing mug of ale in front of him. "No, the villain. His name is Allak. Look at him. Look at that stupid ponytail. It makes you want to kill him, doesn't it?"

"No, not really," Grover said, admiring the braid in the ponytail. He glanced at the other patrons of the pub. They were all staring at Allak as if waiting for something to happen. "Why don't you ask any of them do it? You have strong men here."

Dansk shook his head. "Strong, but not skilled in the way of pain and death. Allak is mean with an axe."

"I'm not really skilled with pain or death, either" Grover said. "I'm a duelist. We lunge, riposte, make a few witty comments and then talk about what sophisticated gentlemen we are. We don't fight axe-wielding madmen."

"No one said he was mad," Dansk said.

"Oh, well that changes it."

"You don't want to get him mad. Oh no." Dansk passed his finger over his throat.

"Well, then I think I'll just enjoy my--"

Dansk slid the mug of ale away. "I'll pay you what Hudo would have been paid."

"I don't need your money."

“Free is fine by me.”

“No, I mean ...” Grover looked over at Allak, who was seated at a large, clean table directly across the room from him. His face was bright red, smiling, even jovial.

“He looks like a nice enough guy.”

He pulled his sack on the table called for a plate, some sauce, and a pitcher of ale.

"What's the sack for?" Grover asked.

"You'll see," Dansk said.

"Dansk," Allak barked. "Dansk, come here! I want to see your endomorphic body so I can laugh."

“Endomorphic?”

“Fat.” Dansk had a strange glow in his eye. "Will you kill him?"

Grover shook his head. "I'm just here to see the apothecary. I didn't come here to kill anyone, no matter what their hair style or level of vocabulary.”

"The money isn't enough, then?"

"Dansk, " Allak screamed. "Get your endomorphic gluteus maximus over here!"

"I don't even know how much you're offering," Grover said.

“It’s—“

"Dansk!" Allak yelled again.

Dansk glanced over to Allak and then back to Grover. "I have to go. Think about it."

Dansk waddled over to Allak. Allak leaned across the table, smiling, and said something softly to Dansk. Dansk froze and then hung his head low. He trudged back into the kitchen and returned with a small leather pouch. Grover watched as Allak opened

it and poured out a stream of silver sovereigns, gold doubloons, and copper drachmas. It was a tidy sum. A fortune for a peasant. A nice profit for a good inn. To Grover it was spare change. Allak counted the money, smiled, and then put a hand to Dansk's chest and thrust him away.

Dansk hurried back over to Grover.

"I had to give him the money," Dansk explained.

Grover nodded. "I'll give you a bigger tip, then"

"That's not the point. I have to keep giving him more and more money. I had to take a loan out a loan from another villain just to pay this villain."

"That's not good business," Grover said.

"I know. If only you could get over your middle class scruples and kill him."

"I'm not middle class," Grover said, offended.

"Then you should have no problem then. You rich have been slowly killing us poor for ages."

"Yes, but that's with the economy, not with weapons. Besides, I have no reason to kill him. He seems a decent sort, has a large, medical vocabulary."

Dansk nodded. "But if you had something against him ..."

Grover fingered the stubble on his chin. "Then I could consider."

Dansk smiled. "Just watch, then. And enjoy the show."

"Okay," Grover said, looking around for a band or some theater group.

"Over there," Dansk said, pointing back at Allak.

Grover looked back at Allak. Allak had now opened his burlap sack, put his hand in, and pulled out a kitten. The kitten was all soft and white, and small in the big man's

hand. It meowed, yawned; then licked Allak's finger. Allak smiled and let the little ball of fur crawl up his arm playfully.

"You see," Grover said. "He likes kittens. I could never kill a man who likes kittens."

Dansk stood still and said, "Oh, he likes kittens ail right."

A serving boy came up and placed a large plate on the table, with a pitcher of ale and some sauce.

Grover started to lose interest, thinking this really wasn't much of a show.

Then Allak picked up the kitten who was now hanging from his chest, kissed it, held it out in front of him, and twisted the neck, until there was a sound akin to kindling popping in a fire. The kitten let out one strangled yelp and then fell lifeless onto the plate.

"He's not going to ...The bastard," Grover hissed, leaning forward. His muscles started to clench.

"So will you kill him?" Dansk whispered into his ear.

"Maybe," Grover said, and looked back at the lifeless kitten on the plate. "Maybe for free."

"For free?" Dansk repeated, catching onto the magic word.

"I said maybe for free. I'll have, to think for a moment."

Allak drew another fluffy kitten out of the bag. This one was a light brown color and it mewed softly. Allak held it on its back and tickled it under its chin. And just as it clawed playfully at Allak's hand, he twisted its neck too.

Grover let out a hiss, standing up from the table. "That rat bastard."

"You'll do it?" Dansk asked, excitedly.

Allak looked up sharply in mid-grab for a third kitten.

"Yes, I'll do it. How much?"

"Well " Dansk hesitated, now that actual sums had to be discussed.

Allak slowly poured sauce on the dead kittens.

"Never mind," Grover said, pushing Dansk out of the way with a broad sweep of his arm. "We can discuss payment later."

Grover stalked over to Allak's table, drawing out the finely balanced rapier that hardly ever left his side, except for parties, festivals, sleeping, bathing, swimming, and the odd streak.

"Drop the kitten, freak," Grover said.

Allak looked up, snorted. The last kitten dropped to the table, still squirming.

"You talking to me," Allak asked, pulling out his axe.

"Are there any other kitten killing freaks in here?"

Several hands raised in the back.

"Who are villains?"

A few hands went down.

"Who are currently wielding an axe?"

All the hands went down except for Allak's.

"I heard they were planning to get a hero."

"I'm no hero," Grover said. "Just a regular guy who doesn't like to see a kitten tortured."

Let's play," Allak said, swiping with his axe. The axe lodged itself into a patron's skull, and Allak pulled it free.

“Okay,” Grover said, poking a patron with his rapier.

“Hey,” the patron cried out.

“Sorry,” Grover said; then turned to Allak. “The patrons don’t like this game, let’s play another?”

“How about I kill you?”

“That’s a game?”

“To me,” Allak said. He swiped with his axe. Grover jumped back, but not before the axe cut through the fabric of his shirt.

The patrons backed away, pulling tables with them, to give Grover and Allak more room. Marble games stopped, and young children stared. Finally the local bookie calculated odds.

"Five to one, the regular guy wins. Two to one, Allak wins."

"How much for a maiming?" someone cried out.

"Or for emasculation? Remember the last time?"

"How about a severed limb?"

“Or disembowelment?"

The bookie started calling out more odds, and people shouted out their bets, heavily in favor of Allak, mainly because if he won and they bet against him, they would be next on his to kill list. A few people did bet for Grover, such as the village idiot, the town dunce and a few people who knew they would be out of town by dusk. Dansk bet on Allak, seeing it as a win either way.

"You hear that, my friend?" Allak asked, swiping. "They're betting on your death."

"Long-term bets," Grover said, dodging. "And who said peoples attention spans were getting shorter?"

Allak lunged, and Grover sidestepped, knocking a table between them, sending alcohol spilling to the floor.

"I'm sure it'll be much sooner. I hope you made funeral arrangements."

"I hadn't planned on it," Grover said. And he started to worry. He had gotten up in the heat of anger, and this guy was actually trying to hurt him. "Whenever you're ready to concede defeat just say so."

Allak laughed and then stopped his attack.

Grover lowered his blade. "Oh, thank god. I was just about to--"

Allak spat on him, ran across the room, and grabbed a torch from a wall sconce. Allak approached with the torch in one hand and his axe in the other.

"I guess we're not finished then?"

Allak beat his chest with his axe still in hand and screamed, "Burn, baby, burn." And then jumped for Grover. Grover slipped on the dirty floor, falling to the ground. The axe slammed into the dirt, close to Grover's head. So close he could see the skull engravings on the axe head. And then the torch swept past his nose. Grover crab walked quickly back to the steps. Reached for the railing to pull himself up.

"So you still think you're a match for me?" Allak gibed.

Grover stood up. "I rather think a goat or a sheep would be a more compatible match for you."

"Oh, you make me laugh," Allak screamed, and swung furiously with the axe and torch.

Grover jumped back, his hand ripping a tapestry off the wall. Grover flung the tapestry desperately at Allak, who caught it with his face. The tapestry draped over the top portion of his body, blinding Allak. While Allak struggled to fling it off, Grover saw his opportunity and ran forward, sinking his blade through the fabric. He pulled the rapier in and out several times. Allak cried out surprise, then pain and then collapsed to the ground. The tapestry turned dark with blood.

“Boo,” went the patrons. “Boo.”

“Totally unfair.”

Another bumped Grover. “I thought heroes were supposed to be honorable.”

Grover looked at the patrons. “You’re just upset that you lost your bets.”

“Whatever,” one of them said. “Those were dirty tricks you used.”

Dansk waddled up and touched the tapestry. There was a smell of a smoldering torch. “You ruined my wife’s favorite tapestry.”

“Sorry,” Grover said. “Now about payment ...”

The tapestry suddenly burst into flames. And Allak, not quite dead, screamed and rolled into some kindling next to the wall. The flames caught quickly. And soon the inn was in flames.

All the patrons ran for their lives, Grover right behind them.

There was a sudden explosion and the roof of the Ragged Wurm collapsed.

Dansk came crawling out, covered in soot and third degree burns, crying, “You ruined me.”

“So, no payment then?” Grover asked.