



Untitled

By

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Nej forced himself to wait several minutes after Bramd and Clay left. Betrayal was not yet a habit, and his heart was beginning to race. He ordered another ale to calm himself and waited out his nervous leg-tapping. When the drink was done, and his employers well on their way to dinner, he walked out the door of the tavern, deliberately swaying slightly as if drunk. He entered the alley next to the tavern, moving deep into the shadow, and leaned up against a wall as though relieving himself. Once he was sure no one was watching him, he began to change.

First, Nej skinned himself up. He was thin anyway, but he wanted to look younger than he was, and unhealthier. His skin grayed, and went hollow and pinched around his face. His hair lightened and thinned, and his nails yellowed. He hunched down into himself to look shorter and brittle-backed. Finally, he sucked in on his cheeks until the skin rippled with acne and pox scars. He pulled some loose tattered clothes out of his bag to complete the disguise. They were poor enough to fit in with his new look, and large enough to fit over his street clothes without being obvious. Once he had completed his change, he heaved himself over the back wall of the alley. Still keeping to the shadows Nej crept along the house to the street, and, when the coast was clear, slipped out into the night.

Bramd and his hulking metal friend weren't bad guys, but they were Cyrians, and everyone had it in for Cyrians. It was easier to not to swim upstream. The money Sejon was paying him helped, too. Never knowing when you might have to skip town made having cash on hand a lot more important. He'd had to start off from nothing too many times to make that mistake again.

Sejon was clearly unstable, though. He had a hate for Bramd like a tapeworm chewing him up from the inside. Nej had considered not reporting in, but Sejon was connected to the local underground and veterans. It would be too difficult for Nej to avoid him while he worked the town. Better to let Sejon know where he could find Bramd and split town with the proceeds tonight.

Sejon was waiting in The Black Dog, a tavern named after the owner's mangy hound. The flea-ridden animal lay like a sack outside the doorway, drooling a puddle onto the ground. The tavern was a run down as its

namesake, leaning where the northwest corner had settled and leaking through a dozen holes in the roof. It reeked of dog and torch smoke and sweat and cheap beer and piss. The owner had fought in the war and always spotted a few for his brothers in arms. This kept the bar full and the owner from making any money.

Nej took a last breath of clean night air and walked in to the Dog. He saw Sejon, unmistakable with his missing right hand, sitting at a table in the back with a couple of local toughs. Too young to have fought in the war, they hoped to learn how they wear the same menacing air as the ex-soldier. They eyed Nej suspiciously as he sat down, but Sejon paid him no heed until he spoke in the voice that went with his usual face. "You wanted to know when they were out at night."

Sejon looked at Nej in surprise, and then chuckled. "Well, well. A changeling. I wonder if those two know what they've gotten in to."

"They don't. Or else they wouldn't have headed out."

"Fair enough. Where are they?"

"Not sure. They headed out to eat by the town square, but Bramd said they weren't likely to be back early. He seems to like to think while he walks, so you can probably find him wandering around town. They left about twenty minutes ago."

Sejon looked pleased. "Good." He set a small purse on the table, and Nej quickly made it disappear. "That's not the whole fee. You'll get the rest after he's taken care of."

"And if you don't take care of him?"

Sejon smiled. "Then consider it a further retainer. If he leaves town, you'll give me some sign as to where. Don't look for me afterwards. I'll find you." He locked eyes with Nej until Nej nodded curtly in agreement. "Boys, we've got a wizard to see before the Cyrian gets his." Sejon and his hangers-on stood and left the bar.

After a minute, the sole barmaid came to the table to collect the empty mugs and get Nej's order. Nej asked for a beer for politeness' sake, but when it came, he used it more for staring at than drinking. His stomach felt sour, and his nose wanted to close up. After a few minutes, he left his beer on the table and walked out. He made for the road heading north towards Ghalt, stopping in the shadows to drop his disguise, and wishing he could drop the stink of The Black Dog as easily. Tonight's certain violence would have an aftermath he wanted no part of. Marketplace had gone bad on him, and it was time to put another town behind him.

Bramd and Clay were at an outdoor table of a café in Marketplace's town square, enjoying the light of the town's only everbright lantern and the cool spring evening. The remains of the meal had been cleared away from in front of Bramd, and a small plate of fruit and a hot cup of tea put in their place. Clay sat across from him, toying with a sturdy mug of water.

"So what do we do now?" Bramd asked.

"Well, we're pretty sure Shiana's not still in town," Clay replied.

"Yeah, but we don't know where she went. The front moved back and forth, and she could have left any time Marketplace was back in Aundair hands."

"She could have left with that female order of Boldrei. They're not here anymore."

"Yeah, but I don't know if they fled to another town, or if they were always wandering and are still on the move."

Clay laughed. "Wandering adherents of Boldrei? Sure. I bet they've stopped for the night next to a hospice run by the Keeper."

Bramd smiled weakly at the joke. "So they found someplace else to set up shop, then. That still doesn't mean she left with them."

"Do we have a better lead?"

Bramd sighed. "No." He looked out at the town square. "It's all changed in just five years."

"A lot has changed in five years, Bramd."

That was true. Cyre was gone, wiped from the face of Eberon. In its place was a grey smudge called the Mournland, where the bodies of more friends than he cared to remember lay strangely preserved, never decaying. New Cyre was a joke, a sad attempt to rekindle a broken dream. And the rest of the world was at peace, at least for now. Bramd wondered how long it would take the other nations to recover from the death of Cyre, to begin to move covertly against one another, to heat up into war. "But it's such a small town. It wasn't supposed to change."

"Being a small town didn't save it during the war."

Bramd changed the subject. "So if the Boldreians are our best lead, where were they likely to have gone? Out on the rail?"

"No. We took out the stones north of here to keep them from bringing in troops or supplies. It would have taken until after the war to repair it."

“I’d forgotten about the rail. They wouldn’t have gone south. West to Vanguard, or north to Vigilant?”

“Not likely, or at least not for long. Those were forts for Aundair, not refugee camps. Would they have gone into Thrane?”

“Not likely. Thrane was on a little better terms with Aundair than us, but not by much. I don’t know if they would have gotten along with the Silver Flame either. It’s more likely they went north to Ghalt before going anywhere else. That’s probably the place to start. If not there we can cross over to Passage and see if they did wind up on the rail.”

They sat for a while, Bramd sipping at his cooled tea and finishing off his fruit. When they had been quiet for long enough Bramd settled up, and they left the café. The sun was fully down, and outside the glow of the town’s everbright lantern, only the moons lit the streets. “Mind if we walk?” Bramd asked. Clay shook his head, and they set off on the streets.

Bramd found himself turning onto his old patrol routes, when he’d been in charge of policing Marketplace under the Cyrian garrison. They’d only held the town for five months, between Eyre and Rhaan, when the Aundairan counter-offensive re-took it. In that time he’d been responsible for security in the town, walked on patrols with his men, broken up fights, run down thieves, and the resistance...

The streets became pinched and narrow as they walked away from the town square. The east side of town was old money from the original market that gave Marketplace its name. The west side of town had sprung up more recently around the lightning rail, thrown up to feed off the growing influx of foreign goods. The fresh white plaster over stone and concrete that made up the buildings of the town square changed to plaster over wood, and then the buildings were made only of wood, as though the layers of the town were being peeled away, fresh growth breaking through the dead accumulation of years. The gutters here failed to empty out, scenting the night air. When wind died, depriving Bramd of fresh air, he was brought out of his reverie, and realized suddenly how alone they were in the poor section of town.

In his woolgathering, he’d led them to where the patrols had been hardest, where trouble had found them the most often. The families were packed two or three to a house, children rooming with their parents, sometimes whole clans inhabiting a row of homes. Blood ran tight, and in five months they’d just begun to sense the danger stirring itself. One arrest or beating could turn the rest of the family against the Cyrians, and playing the families

against one another only threw fuel on the fire. They might have gotten out cheaply being driven back by the Aundairans.

“I was thinking about heading back into town,” Bramd said.

“I was wondering what we were doing out here.”

They started back south, towards the Pickled Friar where they had left Nej. Bramd wondered if he'd been telling himself something with the walk. Was he looking for trouble? That was more like his younger self than the man he was now. Back then he'd reveled in brawling, the rush of danger, and, usually, the satisfaction of coming out still standing. That unrestrained anger was what had gotten him into the army. Now, on the other side of the war, he'd thought it was something else he was after.

One narrow street turned off in the direction of their inn, and they started down it. Halfway to the next intersection some chanting began from a rooftop, and suddenly darkness fell on them from above. Bramd reached for a sword that was not there. “Blistering Fernia!”

A voice called out from beyond the darkness. “Welcome back to town, Bramd.”

Bramd's stomach shriveled. “Hello, Sejon. Still missing the hand?”

“Did you think it would grow back when you cut it off?”

Bramd shoved Clay and hissed, “Run!” Bramd ran away from Sejon's voice to get out of the darkness before he was trapped inside. He emerged to see two kids with clubs waiting for him. They looked strong, but unpracticed. Unprofessional.

They were both right-handed, so Bramd rushed the one on the left to prevent the other from having a clear swing. He paused on his way in, just long enough to let the boy swing in front of him, and then closed inside the club's reach. Keeping the club blocked with his right arm, he hit the kid in the side of the head with his left fist. He pushed forward as the kid backed up, and swung his right fist with all of his strength. It connected with the kid's chin and he fell back, lying down heavily in the street.

As payment for focusing on taking the first kid down, Bramd got the other's club across his shoulder blades. The blow sent him stumbling forwards. He turned it into a run, hoping to put some distance between himself and their attackers. He didn't see Clay, though, and when he looked back saw only the kid chasing him. Cursing, he stopped and turned to take care of his pursuer.

This kid wasn't falling for the same feint as his friend, and kept his club at the ready. Bramd decided to take the hit and approached slowly with his hands raised as though going in to grab hold of the kid. He swung as Bramd closed, and Bramd sped up to take the handle of the club instead of the head. He raised his left arm over the club so that it hit him in the ribs. His breath rushed out of him, but he dropped his arm around the boy's wrists and levered up to force the boy's elbows backwards. The club clattered to the ground as the kid cried out. Bramd let him go and picked up the club.

He needed to take care of the kid before going back in for Clay, so he advanced on the kid. When he saw an opening, he swung at his kneecap. The kid went down and Bramd ran back into the darkness. "Clay!" he shouted. "Get moving!" That was when the sap hit the back of his head.

Bramd's knees buckled, and he almost lost his grip on the club. He fell to the ground and started swinging wildly above himself. He heard what sounded like the sap hitting metal, and then a sudden cry, and the thump of a person hitting the ground farther away. His club hit something hard, and then he was lifted by the shirt and tossed out of the darkness. He lay still, shaken, and saw Clay emerge from the darkness, eyes filled with rage. Bramd was suddenly afraid. Clay looked at him, and after a too-long second the rage drained, and Clay trotted over and lifted him to his feet.

"Can you walk?" Clay asked.

"I think so."

"Then let's go, before they get up and come after us."

They started moving, but two glowing darts flew from the rooftop above and slammed into Clay. He dropped to one knee, and now Bramd stopped to lift Clay. He could see a figure on the rooftop, but didn't want to stick around to see what else was coming. They rose to their feet, leaning against one another, and staggered to the wall underneath the figure. They slid out of the street, and then stumbled, as fast as they could, back towards the Friar.

Clay tried to put his head back together. "What just happened?"

"You know how I used to be garrisoned here? And my men policed the town?"

"Yes."

“I took that guy’s hand. He was caught stealing from the barracks, and that was what we did to thieves. I thought he would have left town.”

“So...”

“So I guess he’s a little mad at me, and found out I was in town. Can we keep moving? I don’t feel like giving them another go at us.” Bramd looked mad, and was favoring his left side.

“All right,” Clay agreed. They started moving again.

After another minute, Bramd asked “What happened to you there? I told you to run.”

Clay’s thoughts were not coming. “I can’t remember. We were walking, and then I’ve got a dent in the back of my head and I feel weak.”

“Well, we got darkness dropped on us. Then Sejon, the guy whose hand I cut off, threatened us. I made a break for it, went back to get you, and we both got sapped. You went nuts, and got hit by magic missiles on the way out.”

“Saps? Who attacks a warforged with a sap?”

“I think the sap was for me. He wanted to get me alive. The other two were meant to keep you from stopping him.”

They made it back to the Friar. The door was open, and the light and sound from the common room spilled out into the night. Bramd walked in first, and Clay clomped ponderously behind him. They ignored the townsfolk and traveling merchants listening to a minstrel play in the tavern and made straight for the stairs. The flickering light from the common room fireplace turned to half gloom, as a single lantern lit the hallway of rooms on the second floor. Bramd opened the door to their room, retrieved a candle from within, lit it on the lantern, and then led Clay back into their room.

Bramd’s chest was still locked at the foot of the bed, and he quickly set to opening it. He attached his scabbarded sword to his belt. “Do you think we’ll run into any trouble on the way out?”

“Out where?”

“Out of town.” Bramd pulled his padding and breastplate from his bag of holding. “I’m not sticking around for Sejon to jump me again.”

“We could go to the watch.”

Bramd laughed. "I'm sure they'd do a great job of looking after a couple of Cyrians. Here." He tossed Clay his belt of daggers. "And get your sword."

Clay fastened the daggers around his waist. He wasn't sure that he had caught up to Bramd's planning. "Are you sure we're ready? Have you got enough food for the trip?"

"Probably not. If I have to I'll catch something along the way."

Clay reached under the bed and pulled out his sword and harness. He fit the leather straps of the harness around his shoulders and tightened them, then slid his sword into place along his back. "Well, if we move fast we can probably get away without more trouble."

A familiar voice interrupted them. "I wouldn't be so sure of that, gentlemen."

Bramd paused, and then went back to fastening his breastplate. "And to think I told Clay that you wouldn't be keeping an eye out for two set-upon Cyrians. You're more professional than I thought, Captain."

"I don't have your heavy hand, Sergeant, but I do keep the peace."

The man in the doorway was the Captain of the Marketplace watch, dressed in the red finery and decorated breastplate of his office. His sword was at his side. Clay's hands twitched involuntarily.

"I would not recommend it, my friend. There are three members of the watch downstairs, and another three outside," the Captain warned Clay, then turned his attention to Bramd. "I understand there was a bit of a rumble tonight."

"We didn't start it, Hector." Bramd kept his back to the Captain, and re-locked the chest.

"When we spoke the other day, I did not say I didn't want you to start any trouble. I said I didn't want any trouble in Marketplace."

Bramd slipped the bag around his chest, and drew its drawstring tight. "Well you won't get any more. We're leaving town."

"Good. This will work out for both of us." He stepped to one side of the door. "After you."

Bramd went out first, his bag slung across his shoulder. Clay followed, being careful not to hit the walls with his sword. There were three red-shirted watchmen waiting downstairs with hands on weapons. The Captain waved at them to stand down, and they fell in around the Cyrians. Three more watchmen joined them outside. "Did you have a preferred direction?" the Captain asked.

“North,” Bramd said. Clay felt the cooling night air chill his plates. Bramd shivered. They walked with their escorts towards the Ghalt road. Clay finally began to see clearly, as though lifting his head out from under water. He became acutely aware of the distance to the buildings around him, and the positions of the guards. Their chances of taking all seven of them were not good. Clay kept calculating as they walked.

“You got to the Friar awfully quick, Hector,” Bramd said.

“It didn’t take an augury to figure out that Sejon would go for you when he found out you were in town.”

“So you kept an eye on him?” The Captain nodded. “I don’t know why you put up with him.”

“The man pays his bills on time.”

There was no exterior wall or gate out of town, just a slow dwindling of buildings until the town streets gave way to the road and farms. The light from the town was dim, and night swallowed the world ahead of them. The escorting watchmen fell back, and the Captain came forward to face Bramd.

“I suppose I should thank you for letting us go,” Bramd said.

The Captain drew his sword without warning, and with the drawing motion drove the pommel into the side of Bramd’s face. He went to his knees, clutching his cheek. Clay almost went for his sword, but there were four swords and two crossbows aimed at him from behind the Captain, and he was already hurt.

“The world’s repaid you for what you did to our town, but I still owe you for letting your men loot my father’s home.” The Captain spat on Bramd. “Do not come back to Marketplace.” He replaced his sword in its sheath and turned back into town. The rest of the watch followed in tow.

Clay knelt down next to Bramd. “Are you all right?”

Bramd spat blood. “Bastard. We’ll see if I lose a tooth. Doesn’t feel good.” He opened up the bag and rummaged around in it for his cloak, which he draped over his shoulders. “It’s going to get cold tonight.” He rose unsteadily to his feet. “Let’s get going.”

They walked into the darkness. The road was a shallow rut leading away from the haloed town. They followed the feel of the ground under their feet rather than any sense of the lay of the land. Bramd swayed as he walked. If Clay closed his eyes and pushed through the unseen world around him, in the back of his head he could hear screams, explosions, the sound of metal flying through the air landing on the ground, on him. Memories lay waiting in the darkness, and the night opened up vast before them.

Nej always slept poorly in the open. He'd retrieved his money and goods from his stashes around town and headed out north as soon as he'd left the Black Dog. It wasn't much of a road out of town, but it got him on his way. He was prepared to work at night, but wasn't rested enough to spend all night walking. He only made it a couple of hours before pulling off into the woods to rest. The rest turned to sleep, but only in brief snatches.

"Well, look what we have here." The voice woke Nej, who peered through barely-open eyes to find Bramd and Clay standing over him. Bramd had drawn his sword. Nej rolled onto his stomach as if not willing to awaken, and used the hand trapped under his body to palm a small knife from within his shirt. He got kicked in the leg, and rolled back over and sat up, acting startled. "Huh? What? Bramd?"

"Yes, you slippery little snake. What are you doing out here in the wilderness?"

"I didn't think it was safe in town. I was talking up a girl in a tavern, when this guy with one hand comes in, picks up a couple of toughs, and leaves. I caught your name floating over and decided Marketplace was about to get unfriendly. I've seen the one-handed guy with some of my local fences, and I figured I didn't want any part of the trouble that was coming your way."

"And you didn't think to warn us?" Clay asked.

"Hey, you guys paid me enough to show you around town and look in to things for you, not to get beat up with you. And you definitely haven't paid my getting-dead-along-with-my-boss fee." Nej shook his head and hoped he remembered this story later. He was still half-asleep.

"I don't believe you, but I'm not leaving you behind us. Up."

"Bramd, are you sure we want to take him with us?" Clay asked.

"I'd rather have him in front of us where we can see him."

"Thanks, guys," Nej said, standing up. "Thanks a lot. Let me get my stuff."

"Hurry it up."

Nej couldn't believe these guys. Maybe he wasn't entirely in the clear, but they didn't know that. And Bramd was telling Clay he didn't trust him right in front of his face. Screw them, Nej thought. Let's earn some cash. He ducked under a nearby bush to retrieve his backpack, and with the knife in his hand scratched a quick 'G' for Ghalt. That was the next big town north of Marketplace. He dragged his backpack out, leaving long tracks in the ground. "Fine. I'm ready when you are."

“After you,” Bramd said, gesturing. Nej stomped out onto the road, leaving plenty of signs of his passing.

Bramd and Clay followed, and the three started walking.

“So why is Mister One-Hand so mad at you?”

“I cut off his other hand for stealing from the Cyrian army.”

“You cut off his hand?” That explained a lot, but Nej had a hard time believing it.

“Are you proud of everything you’ve done in your life?”

“No.”

“Well I’ve got years on you, yet.”

They continued walking in silence.