



THE SILENT BLADE

A SEVEN VIRTUES NOVELLA



JACOB PEPPERS

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The Silent Blade: A Seven Virtues Novella

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The Silent Blade

The door of the *Maiden's Haven* flew open and slammed against the tavern's inside wall with a resounding *crash*. Conversations cut off abruptly as men and women turned wary gazes on the open doorway. At first there was only the darkness, huddled and waiting outside the light of the common room, a creeping, living thing. Then a man materialized out of the shadows and stepped into the lantern light. He wore a tattered brown cloak over his clothes, and as he entered, he pushed the hood back to reveal a face that might have been handsome if it hadn't been so cold. The stranger stopped in the doorway, studying those gathered with eyes that seemed to be everywhere at once, that seemed to know them in an instant and men and women looked away as the weight of that gaze fell on them.

Benjin, the innkeeper, had lived in the Downs, the poor, crime-riddled district of Avarest for over fifty years, and he'd seen that look before. It was the look of a man with murder on his mind. The thought gave Benjin little comfort, the man himself even less. It wasn't uncommon for street toughs or men set on violence to come in the *Haven*, but there was something different about this one, something that made a shiver of fear run up Benjin's spine. Some of it was the man's eyes, the way he seemed to take in everything, missing nothing. Part of it was in the way he held himself, a man that looked as if he was only a moment away from violence, but, most of all, it was the fact that, beneath the brown cloak he wore, the stranger's tunic and trousers were covered in blood,

so much of it that Benjin was hard pressed to tell what color they'd originally been.

Benjin also couldn't help but notice the sword sheathed at the man's back. Weapons, too, weren't a rare sight in the Haven—it *was* the Downs, after all—but most of the time they were carried by either off duty guards or young men wanting to put on a show about how tough they were. This man wasn't a guard; Benjin would have bet his life on that. He was more like the reason why people hired guards in the first place, and he thought that any show the man put on would be one he'd pay to miss.

Benjin let his hand drift beneath the counter to where Bertha, a stout foot and a half club with a well-worn grip, lay always within arm's reach. Bertha had served him well over the years, and he'd once liked to joke with his friends that his peacemaker could also be a "piece-maker" depending on how the night went. They were old jokes made by a younger, dumber man, and they'd not been made about men like the one now standing in the doorway of his inn. Still, as the stranger approached the bar, the club was some small comfort.

The man sank onto a stool with an exhausted sigh, and Benjin felt sweat begin to bead on his forehead as the newcomer studied him, his expression unreadable. "I need a room," he said finally, "And a drink—the strongest you've got."

"Sure," Benjin said, having to force the word out. He poured a double shot of whiskey, barely resisting the urge to pour one for himself. He'd quit years ago. It had been lose the booze or lose Sheila, his wife, and that really hadn't been a choice at all. Five years since the fever had taken her, yet he hadn't taken the habit up again, had never had the urge. At least, that was, until now.

He spared a glance at the corner of the room where his daughter, Anna, was serving two bearded men who, judging by their sleeveless shirts and high-cut pants, were sailors only recently arrived from dockside. It was, he suspected, more luck than skill that kept the two mugs of ale from winding up all over their owners considering that Anna (like everyone else

in the room, including the men themselves) was studying the stranger with a guarded wariness as if she expected him to draw the sword at his back at any moment.

Benjin forced thoughts of Anna and the whiskey away. They went hard, especially the whiskey, but they went, thank the gods, and he slid the glass across the bar to the stranger. “There you are. And don’t worry, it’s on the house. About the room though ... well, sorry to say we’re all full up.”

“Oh?” The man said, raising an eyebrow, “Too many fair maidens seeking sanctuary?”

Benjin tried an uncertain grin, but it felt wrong on his face, so he let it fall. “Something like that.”

The man sighed and reached into his pocket, withdrew something and tossed it onto the counter. Benjin barely managed to catch it before it rolled off the side of the bar and stared at it in surprise. A gold coin. Real gold, if the weight was any indication. The Haven was no fancy hostel on God’s Row, and if he was being honest with himself it wasn’t even near the best the Downs had to offer. A gold coin like the one he now held would have bought a man a month or more of room and board.

Benjin swallowed then slowly, reluctantly, put the coin back on the table and slid it back to the man. “Listen, mister, I don’t want any trouble. I’ve a daughter to look after.”

The man studied him intently, “That yours in the corner there? Big brown eyes? She’s a pretty one—you and the missus must be proud. Though I’ll say she looks plenty old enough to take care of herself. What is she, eighteen? Nineteen?”

Benjin found himself frowning, his fear giving way to anger—and how *had* the man known she was his daughter anyway? “Nineteen, she is. And just what concern is that of yours?” As he spoke, his grip tightened on the peacemaker’s handle.

The stranger waved the question away. “I don’t mean any offense, friend. Look, my name’s Aaron Envelar. What’s

yours?”

“Benjin. Benjin Caldesh.”

The man reached into his pocket again and, in another moment, a second gold coin rested on the counter beside the first. “Listen, Benjin. I’ve had a really long night. Shit, a long week as far as that goes, and I just need a room and something to eat; there’s no need to pull that beater you’re eyeing. And as for trouble, well, it’s already come and gone. The way it will.”

Benjin’s hand froze where it gripped Bertha’s handle. *The way it will.* There seemed something a little too final about that last bit, as if maybe the man had been the one to make the trouble—trouble that bled a lot, by the looks of it—go away. Benjin saw Anna shaking her head out of the corner of his eye, but he pretended not to notice, watching the man as he took a long drink of the whiskey. “Alright,” he said finally, letting go of Bertha and putting both his hands on the counter. “That’ll do me fine, but I’d just as soon you not pay so much. Rooms are two coppers a night and dinner’s an extra. Nothing fancy—my daughter Anna isn’t a particularly good cook, takes after her mother, the gods look after her, but you won’t starve.” He reached across to take one of the gold coins, “Let me just get you some change.”

The man grabbed his hand before he pulled it back and forced the second coin into it. “Never mind that, just take it. And two coppers a night, you say? A third for dinner?” He shook his head, a rueful, tired smile on his face. “An honest man in the Downs. I never thought I’d see it. Just what in the name of Salen’s dead fields are you doing here, anyway?”

Benjin shrugged, reluctantly taking the coins. “Been here near all my life. Just living.”

The stranger grunted, taking the sheathed sword from his back and setting it on a stool beside him. If he noticed the looks of relief that spread through the room at that, he gave no sign. “Aren’t we all. Until we’re not, anyway.”

Benjin swallowed hard, “You know. That is, if you don’t mind me sayin’ so. You’ve got a bit of something right,” he

gestured vaguely at the length of the man's body, "well. Just there."

The stranger, Aaron, looked down at himself as if he'd only just noticed the crimson stains on his clothes and nodded. "Yeah. It's blood. Not mine though. Or, at least," he shrugged, "most of it."

He took another pull of his drink, and Benjin watched him, fascinated despite himself, as the man finished it and sat it down on the counter. "Well, I won't say it's good whiskey, but I guess it'll do the trick."

"The only bad kind's the kind that won't," Benjin said, the grin coming easier this time. "Now, about your room—"

"I'll show 'em to it, Master Benjin."

Benjin and the stranger turned to see Dayna, the Haven's newest serving girl, sauntering to the bar. There was a glint of excitement in her eyes Benjin didn't much care for, and he thought, not for the first time since two weeks ago when he'd hired her, that he'd made a mistake. She was pretty enough, if in a dirty, misused sort of way, and he'd hoped, selfishly maybe, that some of the eyes that so often wandered to his daughter might wander to her instead. And maybe they even did, but it seemed to him that the woman had spilled more drinks than she'd served and anytime work needed doing she somehow managed to disappear. Still, better her than Anna to show the man to his room. "That'll be fine, Dayna," he said, "Just come on back soon as you're done. That stew won't serve itself."

The girl frowned, a look of disappointment on her slightly too-pinched face. "Yeah, alright, Master Benjin." She turned to Aaron, "This way, mister, on up the stairs, ye get."

The man looked at Benjin, raising his eyebrow again, before sliding his empty glass across the table. He grabbed his sword from where it lay and started toward the stairs, Dayna following close behind him. As they walked, Benjin met Anna's disapproving gaze. For his part, the sellsword was focused on putting one foot in front of the other, the whiskey having hit him harder than normal in his exhausted state. For

this reason, neither of them noticed the look Dayna gave to a man sitting by himself at a table in the corner, or the slow smile he showed in return.

In his room, the door closed and latched, Aaron finally allowed himself to relax. The room was small with nothing but a simple bed and an old wooden night stand in way of decoration but that didn't matter to him. It was clean, and what was there was well kept, but most importantly, it had a door with a latch.

He eased his tunic over his head, wincing as it caught on the quickly drying blood. Despite what he'd said to the innkeeper, Benjin, some of the blood that covered his shirt and trousers most definitely *was* his. He looked down at his bared torso, grunting as he noticed that the hasty bandage he'd wrapped around the wound in his side was stained a deep crimson. A nasty wound, but not a killing one, thank the gods. The cut on his arm was shallower, and the bandage he'd used to wrap it before leaving his other room was only spotted with blood.

The rest were only the minor bruises and scrapes a man could expect when fighting for his life. Not bad, all told, for someone woken up in the middle of the night with two men trying to kill him. He bared his teeth at the memory. His door being kicked in, two men, *Hale's* men, he was sure of that, charging into his room, their swords drawn.

And just how had they known it was his room, anyway? Soon, he'd have to pay a visit to Sloan, the inn's owner, and have a long talk, maybe one of those talks where somebody stops breathing. Still, he'd left the bastard a mess to clean up anyway. The two assassins had died, but they hadn't died easy, Aaron had made sure of that, and he suspected Hale would have some hard questions for Sloan when his men didn't come back.

Maybe you should have just said yes, a part of him thought. A sellsword's life was no easy one, after all. Taking jobs a man would rather pay good coin to get someone else to do than risk himself at, not to mention the fact that half your employers tried to kill you when the thing was done. No more wondering where his next meal was coming from, no more looking over his shoulder. Hale was, after all, one of the most powerful crime lords in the Downs, matched only by Grinner. Not a purse was stolen or a pocket picked in the Downs that one of the two didn't get their cut. Would it really be so bad to have some stability? Some people looking out for him?

But no. He was not a good man, he knew that about himself, *had* known it for many years now, but he'd promised Darrell, the man who'd taken him in and taught him the sword, that he would not become a criminal, and so he would not. Besides, fuck Hale. The man would learn that being told no to a job offer wasn't the worst thing that could happen. Aaron would make sure of it.

A knock on the door pulled him from his reverie, and his eyes snapped up, his hand darting to his sword where it lay on the bed, "Who is it?"

"Dayna, sir," the woman said, "come with your food."

He kept the sword in hand as he opened the door and took a step back to let her in. The woman held a bowl of steaming soup, and Aaron found his mouth watering as she brought it inside and put it on the nightstand. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until he smelled the aroma of cooked meat and vegetables. He frowned as another man entered the room, straining and dragging something behind him.

Aaron frowned, "Who's this?"

"Hmm?" The girl asked, her eyes roaming over his bare torso before finally looking to the doorway. "Oh, don't mind him, sir, that's just Olem. He's a simpleton, you understand, can't talk, but he's as strong as an ox. Benjin keeps him around the place to do odd jobs for him." She wrinkled her

nose in disgust, “Though I can’t say as I know why anyone’d want to keep a half-wit like him around.”

“I don’t know,” Aaron said, meeting her gaze, “maybe having someone around that knows how to keep their mouth shut isn’t such a bad thing. Anyway, what’s he doing?”

Her face turned red at that, and she opened her mouth to say something before thinking better of it. When she did speak, her tone was abrupt, obviously angry, “I thought as maybe you’d like a bath to wash all that blood off. They’s a well in the basement the water comes up just as hot as you please. Though can’t say as why I bothered if’n I’m just going to get talked to like a piece of trash anyway.”

If you don’t want to be treated like trash, stop acting like it, Aaron thought, but he managed to keep the words back. Barely. “Thanks, but I didn’t order a bath.”

“It won’t cost you none extra. Besides, if’n you lay on the bed with those clothes on, why you’ll get it filthy and who’ll be doing the wash? Not that spoiled Anna, that’s for sure, no not the sort of work for her. Why it’ll be poor old Dayna has to spend her day soakin’ em and washin’ out the blood. That is,” she said, grinning what she must have taken for a seductive grin, “unless you was to sleep naked.”

Aaron frowned, part of him thinking that the woman could be a problem but the bigger part thinking that a bath *did* sound good. A chance to wash the blood off, to clean his wounds. He’d seen men die from infection in smaller cuts than the one on his side, and it was never a pretty thing.

“Alright,” he said, “a bath’ll be fine.” She grinned, and he held up a hand, “a bath and that’s *all*.”

She recoiled as if struck and turned to see that Olem had managed to get the wooden tub into the room. “Come on then you idiot,” she said, slapping him on the arm, “*His highness* is much too good for the likes of us. Best we get out of his way before he sets his guards on us.” She turned back at the door, giving a mock bow, “I’ll be filling it up for you directly, your Majesty.”

For the next half hour, Aaron sat on the bed and ate, savoring the meal. There was nothing better for a man's appetite, he'd found, than nearly dying. The meat was tough and stringy, and the vegetables were slightly soggy, testifying to the truth of Benjin's words about his daughter's cooking, but right then it tasted like just about the best meal he'd ever had. As he ate, the woman, Dayna, came back and forth, filling the tub with buckets of water and pointedly not looking in his direction. He paid her little attention, his mind already on thoughts of ways to pay Hale back for the surprise awakening.

"Alright then, your *kingship*," the woman said, pulling him from thoughts of blood and vengeance, "your bath waits for you."

Aaron turned to her, "Thanks."

She seemed to take this as a good sign, smiling once more in that calculated way, "I was wondering ... after you was clean and all, if maybe you wouldn't want to—"

"Just the bath," he said again, holding back a sigh. He reached into his pocket and took out a gold coin, tossing it to her, "With my thanks."

She snatched the coin out of the air, something about the gesture reminding him of the way carrion birds will snatch a piece of meat in flight, and sneered. "I hope you enjoyed the meal," she said. Then she turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

Aaron sighed and walked over to the door, latching it, before beginning to strip out of his remaining clothes and remove the bandages.

He took off his boots first—fine, black leather ones, the nicest piece of clothing he owned—careful to grab the knife he kept secreted there. He removed the simple, unadorned gold necklace from around his neck, placing it reverently in the night stand's drawer. Then, the knife still in his hand, he walked to the tub and sank into it, placing the blade beside him on the floor. He'd learned long ago that, in the Downs, a man who didn't keep a blade close didn't make it long.

The water was luke-warm and smelled vaguely of sulfur, but despite this he found himself relaxing, sliding into the tub and letting his head rest back on its wooden surface. He should be more worried, he knew that. Hale's assassins had failed, but he had more—men like Hale always did—and it wasn't as if Aaron had exactly been subtle. Not that he could have if he'd wanted to, walking around the streets covered in blood, even in the Downs, was guaranteed to draw attention.

He knew he should prepare in case Hale's men found him again. A latch was all well and good, but latches could be broken—the night's events had proved that if nothing else. He knew this, yet he found his thoughts growing fuzzy as he lay in the tepid water, his worries seeming less and less important with each passing moment. He realized with something bordering on alarm that he was tired, *impossibly* tired. His eyelids felt as if someone had tied lead weights to them, and his movements felt sluggish, uncertain. And was that really so surprising, considering the day he'd had? Still, there were things he needed to do, precautions he needed to take. In just a moment. In a moment, he would get up, slide something in front of the door, maybe pay the innkeeper, Benjin—he seemed like a good enough sort—to tell him if anyone came around asking questions. With that decided, he sank further into the tub, his eyes closing of their own accord.

He didn't wake so much as surface above the level of unconsciousness, the way a drowning man might be carried above the water by the ocean's waves only for it to bury him again. There were voices, a man and a woman. Their words were muffled, unclear, and his confused, muddy thoughts could only pick up bits and pieces.

"Fool should ... listened. Boys wouldn't ... hurt her none ... just ... her a woman ... wasn't worth his life." A man's voice, one he didn't recognize.

The woman's voice now, angry, familiar, "Men ... do all your thinking with your ... came for money ... have hired a whore. Grinner's ... be pissed."

Alarm bells ringing in his head, Aaron tried to open his eyes and found that he could not. Fighting down the urge to

panic, he tried to move his arms and legs and found that they, too, refused his commands. He remembered the woman, sneering, telling him she hoped he enjoyed the food, and he cursed himself inwardly. She'd drugged him. Of course she had, and he'd been too stupid, too tired to think of it. Still, whatever she'd given him must have been wearing off as he found himself able to make sense of their words now.

"Shouldn't have killed him or the others, you damned fools," the woman said.

"Hey, we didn't have a choice," the man's voice, defensive, "well, you seen him. He damn near knocked Dwayne's head off with that club. Besides, we wasn't goin' to hurt her none."

"And the others?"

Sounds, as they spoke, Aaron struggling to place them. The quilt on the bed being thrown off, a muffled crash as the bed itself was turned over. The metallic jingling of gold and silver as they found his coin pouch in his trousers. "Ah, now what do we have here?" The man's voice, and Aaron could hear the greed in it. *Just leave it at that*, Aaron thought desperately, *take the gold and just leave it*.

"I *said* what about the others?"

"Aw shit," the man's voice again, apologetic, "we couldn't just leave 'em, could we? Them bein' witnesses and all. Besides, the girl is a looker, seein' her ought to put us right back in Grinner's good graces."

The sound of a drawer sliding open, and Aaron felt his heart thundering in his chest, "You better hope it does or," a pause, then a low whistle. "Well, now, what's this pretty?" *Not the necklace*, he thought, near frantic now, fighting a silent struggle to get his dead limbs moving.

The man's voice, eager, "Real gold, you think? We could sell it, Grinner wouldn't have to—"

The sound of a slap, a man's voice crying out in shock. "Don't be a damned fool," Dayna said, "it'll go straight to

Grinner and you better pray it and the girl's enough to keep him from guttin' you and the others."

"Hey," the man, indignant, "you're in it too. If I go down then—"

"Ah just shut up and come on. The others are already gone, and we've got to—just what in the fuck are you doing?"

"Hey, you got a necklace. I ain't never seen a nicer pair of boots than these here. They look like they might even be my size."

A muddled groan came from somewhere close by and, after a moment, Aaron realized it had been him.

"What the—I thought you said he'd be out for hours?"

"He should have been. This whole thing's went to shit. I'll take the necklace, you just take care of him. And for fuck's sake hurry it up."

"Hey wait a damned mi—" but the man cut off at the sound of a door closing. "Aw, you bitch," he said, his words a low hiss.

The sound of metal scraping against a scabbard, and Aaron struggled to make his body obey his commands. Nothing. Nothing. *There*. Had his arm twitched or was he imagining it? The sound of footsteps approaching, and he could feel someone looming over him. "Nothing personal, friend," the man said.

Aaron called on every ounce of energy he had, pushing against the fuzzy barrier of the drug the woman had given him, pushing, pushing, and then, in an instant, something gave. His eyes snapped open, and in the same instant he caught the man's wrist with the knife only inches away from his throat, grabbed his own blade from where it lay beside the bath and slammed it into the man's chin and up into his mouth.

Blood fountained out, turning the bath water red. Wet, hacking noises came from the man's throat. He stumbled backward, falling, and Aaron lost sight of him over the tub's side. His legs would move now, if barely, and he tried to climb over the tub but found they didn't have the strength. Instead,

he hoisted himself up and over with only the use of his arms and tumbled to the floor feet away from his attacker. Conscious of his own vulnerability, Aaron crawled to the man through a numb haze, his vision blurry, thinking that at any moment his would be killer would rise and finish the job.

He didn't, though, and Aaron eventually managed to work his way to the man who, he saw, was quite dead, the blade having went up through his chin and mouth and into his brain. Aaron lay by the corpse for some time, gasping in an effort to get his breath back, half-expecting someone, the woman, maybe, or one of the others they spoke of to come through the door, to see what had happened and kill him. But no one came and, after what felt like an eternity, the feeling began to return to his legs.

He struggled to his feet, wavering uncertainly, rubbing at his blurry eyes. He stumbled to the night stand, ripped the drawer out and staring at it in something approaching panic. The necklace was gone; they'd taken it. A feeling of loss and despair washed over him worse than anything he'd felt since he was a child, since he'd come down the stairs and found his parents dead in their family's parlor, lying in pools of spreading blood. He remembered a child's hand, desperate, reaching out in longing, remembered the short stubby fingers finding the necklace, feeling it in his hands. First his mother and father, now the necklace, taken from him. But one of them ... one of them he would get back.

He grabbed his boots from beside the door and shuffled to where his clothes lay scattered on the floor. He frowned in disgust at the bloody tunic and trousers before a thought struck him, and he glanced back at the corpse on the floor, a grim, humorless smile spreading on his face, "You look like you're just about the right size."

Dressed in the dead man's clothes, his sword once more sheathed at his back, Aaron slid the door of his room open. He

suspected that everyone was gone by now, but his body still felt weak, his motions unsure, and he wasn't prepared to test it if he could help it.

He risked a glance out of the door, first one way then the other. Finding no one, he slipped out of his room and crept down the hallway. He stopped at the room next to his, pushed the door open with the toe of his boot. Inside was a room that matched his completely, except, of course, for the fact that his room held only one dead man. A middle-aged man lay dead on the floor. He looked to have been stabbed repeatedly. Had he heard something, perhaps, and gotten up to see what it was? Probably, and his wife or escort—it could be either, in a place like this—had been the lucky one. From the looks of it, she'd never woken up and, thanks to some man or woman's blade, never would again.

He passed several more rooms as he made his way to the stairs, but he didn't stop to check them. He knew well what he would find. At the top of the stairs, he stopped, hearing something. He cocked his head, listening, a hand drifting to the sword at his back. The sound came again, and he placed it. It was the low groaning of a man and, unless he completely missed his guess, a dying one.

He worked his way down the stairs, taking in the common room of the inn. Several of the tables had been overturned. Broken glass and splintered wood lay strewn about the floor. Corpses were scattered about the room, including the body of the man, Olem, who'd brought the tub he'd bathed in. He looked around the room with a practiced eye, recreating the scene in his mind.

There'd been four of them, maybe five. They hadn't carried swords but knives—many of the corpses had defensive wounds on their arms. The groan came again, and he followed the trail of devastation to the bar from where the sound had originated. He worked his way around the wooden counter and found Benjin. The innkeeper had been stabbed several times, but judging by the blood on the end of the club he still held gripped in one white-knuckled fist, he hadn't gone down easy.

He'd managed to drag himself up so that his back was propped against the wall.

His eyes met Aaron's and he let out a shuddery breath. "M-Mr. Envelar."

Aaron squatted down beside the dying man, "Benjin."

"My ... my daughter," the innkeeper said, grunting in pain, "They took her."

Aaron nodded, not thinking about the man's daughter, but his mom's necklace, about the last piece of his parents that he had. "I know."

"Please ... Mr. Envelar," he said, the desperation clear in his voice, "can you help me? Call the city guard or...." He broke off coughing, blood dribbling down his chin.

Aaron sighed. The guard wouldn't help. Oh, they'd make a show of investigating the murders at the inn, asking questions, writing reports, but it would be no more than that. Dozens of the city guard, at least, were on Hale or Grinner's pay roll, many of them growing rich from ignoring what the crime bosses wanted them to ignore and ensuring that others did the same. The rest of the city belonged to the guards, but the Downs belonged to Hale and Grinner. It had been that way for years, and it would take more than half a dozen dead and one kidnapped girl to change that.

Benjin must have seen something of Aaron's thoughts in his eyes. Either that or he came to the conclusion on his own because his expression grew more desperate. "They won't help."

"No."

The innkeeper's eyes slipped closed, slowly, and he went silent. Aaron waited for a minute, then two, before rising and starting away. He'd taken no more than two steps when the innkeeper spoke, "Do you ... know something, Mr. Envelar?" Aaron turned back to the innkeeper. "I thought ... your name ... familiar. Remembered. A sellsword ... they call you, the Silent Blade."

Aaron shrugged. It had never been a name he'd been particularly fond of, "They call me a lot of things."

"I have ... some money," the older man said, his words thick, his voice sluggish now. "My daughter" His body gave a shudder and was still. He did not move or speak again.

"I'm sorry," Aaron said to the dead man. Then he turned and walked out of the inn.

In the street, Aaron hesitated. Grinner's men, so the woman had said. Sent to shake the innkeeper down, maybe but then what? What had started as blackmail had turned into a mass murder because some stupid bastard wasn't willing to accept that a woman didn't want him and had decided to try to take by force what he couldn't have otherwise. It was terrible, but, then, it was the Downs. He couldn't help those people—they were dead already—but he could, he *would* get his mother's necklace back.

The woman had said they'd make it a gift to Grinner, along with the girl, and the urge was strong to go to one of the taverns he knew Grinner's men frequented and beat the crime boss's location out of him. The problem, of course, was that in his current state, he could barely stand, let alone fight a room full of Grinner's men. Besides, Grinner was notoriously paranoid, and it was said that no one in his organization had even seen him face to face, save his second in command, a short, chubby man that went by the name of Claude.

Aaron had seen Claude once or twice before, around the Downs. The man wore a suit and had looked more like a soft banker from God's Row than a crime boss's right hand man. Normally, such a man would be an easy mark and wouldn't last an hour in the Downs, but the citizens of the poor quarter treated him almost like a king instead and not only because he belonged to Grinner. Claude, it was said, was sicker and

crueler than Grinner himself, a man who enjoyed nothing more than visiting pain and torture on others.

No, it would be foolish to go to one of Grinner's places of business and more foolish still to try to track down Claude. The Downs were big, after all, and he had no idea where to look. What he needed was a place to rest, a place to find answers.

He started for the *Traveler's Rest*, a hand cupped to his side where his exertions had reopened the wound. Night had come in full now, and he only passed a couple of people in the streets, a thing for which he was thankful. The shirt he'd taken was cleaner than his own, but one of life's hard truths was that you didn't stab a man in the throat without making a mess. The few people he did pass gave him a wide berth, eyeing his bloody shirt warily, before hurrying on their way.

He was only a few streets from the Traveler's Rest and shuffling noticeably now, his wounds taking their toll, when he noted, out of the corner of his eye, two shadows separating themselves from one of the alleyways and following behind him. He knew it was unwise to show weakness in the Downs, but there was no help for it, so he walked on. Normally, he would have stopped and let the two men catch up, would have let them know he was no easy mark. The problem, of course, was that—just now—he was.

He breathed a quiet sigh of relief when he turned a corner and saw the Traveler's Rest. It was a large building, though it looked run down, abandoned, giving the impression that it might collapse at any moment. A beggar in filthy rags sat not far away from the entrance. Aaron reached into the coin pouch he'd taken back from the dead man and flipped the beggar two coins as he passed, "Two of them. Five minutes, no more," he said without stopping.

The beggar nodded once, and then Aaron was walking inside the door. The entry room was small, almost all of the space taken up by the dust-covered counter behind which sat an old woman. "Hate to tell ye," the woman said in a thick, uneducated accent, eyeing him, "but we're all full up. Ain't got room for a soul less he can sleep standin'."

Aaron tossed the old woman another of his coins, and she caught it in the air with surprising agility. A moment later, it vanished in her dress. "I wonder, mother," he asked, "may I smoke?"

The woman smiled, tilting her head slightly, and when she spoke, her accent was gone, leaving instead the cultured voice of an educated woman, "Yes, you may." She smiled, "Room service will be right out, sir." She reached under her desk, pushing something, and a door to the side of the counter slid open. A thickly muscled man looked out at him, "Ah. Silent." He said, acknowledging Aaron with a nod, before stepping to the side.

Aaron walked inside, the door closing behind him, and, as always, was shocked by the club's interior. The tiled floor sparkled where it wasn't covered in expensive, ornamental rugs, so shiny that he could almost see himself in it. Expertly crafted tables and booths stretched throughout the room with men and women in suits and dresses sitting at them talking amiably. Pipe smoke drifted through the air, a gray curtain that made seeing very far ahead of him difficult, but it did not obscure the large stage on which a woman danced evocatively to an accompanying harp.

He moved past several groups of people to the bar, wincing as he sat down at one of the stools. "A beer, please."

The bar woman had a body that could cause wars, and she looked no older than twenty, but Aaron knew her to be fifteen years older than that. She turned at the sound of his voice, and her face lit up with a smile. "*Silent*," she exclaimed, leaning over the bar, her tightly fitting corset displaying a view he couldn't help appreciating before she kissed him loudly. She leaned back, a pouty look on her face, "it's been too long. I was starting to think you'd forgotten about me."

He smiled, "Wouldn't dream of it, Celes."

She winked mischievously then seemed to notice his shirt for the first time. Before speaking, though, she poured him a beer and put it in front of him. *Damn, I could get to love*

this woman, he thought. “What happened?” She asked worriedly, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, waving it away, “nothing I can’t handle. Anyway, I’d love to talk more, Celes, but there’s something I have to take care of. Is she in?”

She studied him, her face serious, “You working, Silent?”

He shrugged, “I guess you can say that. I’ve only got a couple of questions for her, that’s all. I won’t be long.”

Celes hesitated for a moment then nodded, “Alright.” She raised a finger above her head and in the time it took Aaron to turn and look, a man had walked up to the bar.

“Go and tell her Silent’s here.” The man nodded and hurried away without a word.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She said once the man was gone. “Word on the street is Hale’s not too pleased about you refusing his offer.”

Aaron grunted, “Yeah, I got that impression. I mean to have a meeting with him soon, have a little talk about it.”

Celes snorted, her dainty nose turned up, “Whenever you talk with someone, they have a tendency of winding up dead.”

Aaron shrugged again, “Some words can kill.”

Celes nodded, “Yeah,” she said, eyeing his sheathed blade, “Swords too.” She looked past him, “Ah, there she is. It really was good seeing you again, Silent. Come back soon. And don’t end up dead if you can help it.”

“Not if I can help it.”

He turned to see May approaching from across the room. She was a heavy set woman with a jovial face, and a motherly air despite the fact that she wore a sparkling gem-studded green dress and enough ruby rings to bankrupt a nobleman. Her long red hair seemed to blaze in the soft warm glow of the overhead lighting, and when she saw Aaron at the bar, she smiled widely, hurrying forward. Two thickly-muscled men followed behind her, scanning the crowd who parted before

her, bowing their heads to her as if she was some visiting dignitary.

“Silent,” she said, pulling him into a tight embrace and squishing him against her massive bosom, “by the gods, but it’s good to see you.”

He winced at a fresh pain in his side as she held him out at arm’s reach, a mother checking on the health of her favored son. “What’s happened? And how bad are you?”

“I’m fine. It’s good to see you, May.” he said, impressed by how quick she’d caught on despite having known her for years. The woman might *seem* like some kindly mother, but she was one of the most cunning and resourceful people he’d ever met. There was a reason why even Hale and Grinner were said to be wary of May.

She tsked, “Oh, there’s no reason to be a tough guy, not with me. How bad is it?”

He shrugged, “I’ve had worse. Probably.”

She rolled her eyes, “Nancy’ll see to you. It’s not like she hasn’t done it before.”

Aaron shook his head, “I’m sorry, May, but I don’t have the time. I just need to ask you a couple of questions and—“

“And you can ask me as many as you want,” she said, “while Nancy sees to you. I won’t have any arguing.”

He sighed and allowed himself to be led across the room. May gestured to a woman sitting at one of the tables and the woman cut off what she’d been saying to a young man in midsentence, got up, and followed after them, her companion looking after her with a disappointed expression.

May led him through a door and into a small room. One of the guards posted up outside of the door while the other followed May, Aaron, and the woman inside. “Silent,” the other woman said, nodding her head to him, “It’s good to see you.”

He nodded back, “You too, Nance. How’s everything?”

“Oh, you know, same old same old. This’d better be good, I was just getting ready to have some fun tonight.”

May sighed, shaking her head, “I’ve told you before, Nancy, you have to make them work for it. Too easy, and they won’t appreciate it once they’ve got it.”

Nancy and Aaron shared a smile at that, and May snorted, “Lift your shirt, you bastard.”

Aaron tried again, “Really, May, it’s not—“ he broke off, noticing her expression, one that said she’d have her way even if she had to tie him down to do it. “Alright,” he said, “but I’m in a hurry.”

“Well,” May said, “while Nancy does her work, you tell me what happened, and we’ll see just how much of a hurry you’re in.”

He took off his shirt, deciding it was better to get it over with, and Nancy frowned, “Whoever bandaged this did a shitty job.”

He grunted as she pulled off the bandage, “I was in a little bit of a hurry.”

Nancy looked at the wound that was leaking blood again and whistled. “Well, that’s a nasty one. I’ll have to stitch it.”

“Fine,” Aaron said.

“I have some Alera root extract. Help numb the pain.”

“No thanks. I’ve had just about as much numbing today as I’m prepared to take.”

“Oh?”

He sighed, knowing there was no way to avoid telling them. “I was drugged.”

“Was it Hale?” May asked, her tone angry.

“No,” Aaron said, gesturing at his side, “this was Hale. The drugging came later.”

“Wow,” Nancy said, walking to a drawer and taking out needle and thread, “you really know how to have a good

time.”

Aaron nodded, thinking of the woman, Dayna, who had his mother’s necklace, “Fun’s not over yet.”

“I’m so sorry, Aaron,” May said, scowling at Nancy who wisely pretended not to notice, “I just heard about Hale coming for you a few hours ago. I sent a man to your room to warn you but”

“Yeah,” he said, “I wasn’t there. I was at the Maiden’s Haven. One of the women drugged me and Grinner’s men attacked the place. From what I gather, it was a shakedown gone wrong. They killed everyone.”

May gasped, and Aaron gritted his teeth as Nancy began her work. “Are you sure?” May asked, “Benjin’s dead?”

He knew it shouldn’t surprise him that May would know of the man—it often seemed to him that she knew about everything that went on in the Downs. “Yeah.”

May growled deep in her throat, “Benjin was a good man. A friend. Grinner should know better.”

Aaron shook his head, “I don’t think Grinner planned on killing anybody. Some of his men just got out of hand.”

May sighed, “Oh, poor Benjin. And he had a daughter,” she hesitated, “oh, damn my memory. What was her name?”

“Anna.”

“That’s it! And what of her?”

Aaron hesitated. He knew what would happen if he told May the truth. There were certain things she wouldn’t abide, and the kidnapping of a young pretty girl was one of them. She would bend all of her considerable resources to getting the girl back, would even cause a war with Grinner if that’s what it took. But as intelligent and resourceful as she was, May and her people weren’t warriors, or, at least, not many of them were. She had a few body guards and bouncers, but mostly women worked for her, women taken in off the streets and given something better. They wouldn’t last long against the kind of killers Grinner employed. He couldn’t be responsible

for that, so he did something he'd never done before—he lied to May. “Yeah, they got her. She’s dead with the rest.”

“*Damnit,*” May said, slamming her hand on the table and making Nancy—and as a result, her needle—jump. Nancy murmured an apology, and Aaron waved it away, gritting his teeth at the fresh stab of pain. May paced the room, her eyes flashing with anger, “You can stay here, of course. I’ll talk to Grinner and Hale both. Get this settl—“

“No.”

May turned, looking at him as if he’d gone crazy, “No?”

“No, May,” he said, his voice stern. “I won’t be the cause of a war between you, Grinner, and Hale, and I won’t be staying here, as much as I appreciate the invitation. I’ve got to finish this. I don’t want you putting yourself between me and them. You’d be crushed, you and I both know it. Besides, what good is a sellsword that can’t fight his own battles?”

She stared at him for several seconds then gave a reluctant nod, “Fine, I won’t get involved. But why won’t you stay here? Surely, you need some time to re—“

“They took my mom’s necklace. I’m going to get it back.”

May stared at him, her eyes wide. Then the iron came back into her gaze and she nodded again, “What do you need from me?”

“I need to know where Grinner is.”

May sighed, “Oh, Aaron. Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“May—“

“No, Silent,” she said, shaking her head, “it would be suicide. Grinner’s got hundreds of men working for him. You’re good, but you’re not that good. You’d be dead before you even got inside whatever hole he’s hiding in.”

“I’m not planning on dying, May. And I *am* going to find Grinner, with or without your help. I appreciate your concern, but frankly it’s none of your damn business. If I have to pile

the corpses of Grinner's men so high that he'll have to climb them to take a shit, that's what I'll do to get back what's mine. If you can't handle that then stay the fuck out of my way."

A dangerous silence descended as May met his gaze, her eyes blazing. Nancy finished her stitching and stepped back. She looked between the two of them and swallowed hard. "Ma'am ... if there's nothing else...."

"Go." She turned to her bodyguard, "You too. Wait outside."

The big man raised an eyebrow, "Ma'am?"

"Was I unclear?" She asked, her voice suddenly low, dangerous.

Despite the fact that the man was a head and a half taller than her, he paled at her tone. "No ma'am. I'll be outside if you need me."

She waited until they were gone before turning back to Aaron, "Nobody talks to me like that, Silent. *Nobody*. And you can be sure they don't in my *own club*."

He remained silent, matching her gaze and finally some of the anger in her eyes faded. After a time she sighed, "You're going to do this no matter what I say, aren't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

May ran a hand through her hair in frustration. "Alright, I'll help you as much as I can, but I have to tell you that not even I know where Grinner stays. Nobody does."

Aaron opened his mouth to speak, but May held up a hand forestalling him, "Nobody knows where to find Grinner, but there's a chance I know someone who could get you a shot at that sick dog of his."

Aaron felt hope rising in his chest, "Claude?"

"Don't get too excited," she said, "I said there's a *chance*."

"I'll take it. Thanks, May. I appreciate it."

She grunted, “You might not be thanking me once you hear who it is. You remember Lucius?”

“*Lucius?*” Aaron asked incredulous, “He’s still alive? I thought someone would have laid him horizontal by now.”

May shrugged, “It’s the cockroaches that are the hardest to kill. But you know who he works for, don’t you?”

Aaron sighed, “Hale.”

She nodded, “And as I understand it, you and Hale aren’t on the closest of terms right now.”

“Any closer and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Right. Well, word is that Lucius has been digging into Grinner for Hale, trying to get anything on him he could. Say this for the little bastard; he keeps his ear to the ground. He was in the club not a month ago, bragging to one of my girls about how he could take down Claude and Grinner too, anytime he wanted.”

Aaron snorted, “He’s about as likely to take down Grinner as I am to marry a princess, and the man would say anything if he thought it would get him laid. That’s pretty thin, May.”

May arched an immaculately shaped eyebrow, “Well, then I suppose you’ll just have to follow one of your other leads. Assuming you have one, of course.”

Aaron sighed, “You know I don’t.”

She smiled a humorless smile, “And so?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She waved a hand dismissively, “Last I heard, Lucius was staying at the Whistle.”

Aaron rubbed at his temples, “The Wetted Whistle?”

May smiled at his discomfort, “That’s the one. Not the most ... *extravagant* of brothels, shall we say, but, then, Lucius is not the most extravagant of people, is he? Oh, and, in case you didn’t know, that’s one of Hale’s. Which probably

means it'll have a dozen of his men inside—not, of course, that such a trifle would matter to you.”

“Thank you, May,” Aaron said, grabbing his shirt and putting it on, “I owe you.”

May rolled her eyes, “Pay me back by staying alive. Oh, and Aaron?”

He turned to find her staring at him, her expression grim. “The next time you disrespect me in my own club, you'll have worse things to worry about than Hale or Grinner. Are we clear?”

He nodded, a cold sliver of fear pricking his heart, “Yes ma'am.”

He started for the door, and she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, “Your parents did a lot for the people around here, Aaron. I know you think they were fools to throw in with Prince Eladen, but he's the only one of the Royal Seven that's done anything for the people since King Marcus died. If it wasn't for his damned blood thirsty brother Belgarin” She waved a hand, dismissing it, “Your parents may have not picked the winning side in the war—it's still too early to tell—but they did pick the *right* one. They were good people.”

“And now they're dead ones.”

May sighed, shaking her head, “Good luck, Aaron. And see Celes on your way out. She'll get you some new clothes. If you're going to your death, you might as well go properly dressed.”

Aaron nodded, thoughts of his mother and father too close to the surface for him to trust himself to speak.

Aaron passed the beggar outside of the *Rest* and noticed absently that it was a different man than the one who'd been there before. As for the two men that had been following him,

there was no sign, only a fresh spot of what looked like blood on the dirty cobbled alley.

Dressed in the new black tunic and trousers Celes had given him, his wounds seen to, Aaron felt better than he had in a long time and despite what he had to do, he felt his spirits buoyed as he made his way through the Downs.

He looked up at the sky, noting that it would be daylight in a few hours, and regretted the amount of time he'd spent at the *Rest* just as he regretted how abrupt he'd been with May. The club owner had done a lot for him since he'd been in Avarest, a lot she didn't have to, but he didn't want her involved any more than necessary. The more involved she was, the more likely she would end up in danger because of him, and he wouldn't have that.

There weren't many people out in the streets, but there were a few. Sailors mostly, come to spend a night ashore drinking and carousing in the Downs, one or two men and women that were obviously shopkeepers returning from a late night and, of course, the professionals: whores, pickpockets, muggers. Men, women, and oftentimes children, out to strip the unwary of their coins in the best way they knew how.

As he drew closer to the *Whistle*, less and less people shared the street with him until, finally, he was alone. Even in the Downs, some places were safer than others and the roads he traveled now were deep in the heart of Hale's territory. Residents of the Downs knew to avoid such streets and visitors learned the lesson quickly—if, that was, they were left alive to learn anything at all.

It didn't take him long to come to the brothel, a tall, two-storied building. While the other homes and shops on the street were dark, their windows and doors closed and latched against the darkness, the inside of the *Whistle* was bright, shining in the darkness like a beacon. Or a flame, maybe, and did that make him the moth too stupid to know it was going to get burned?

He shook off the morbid thought and from the relative safety of the darkened alleyway, he considered his options.

Two men stood at the front of the Whistle, swords at their sides. Hired men ready to kill anyone that didn't belong. Anyone like him.

He could sneak around the back of the building, maybe, see if there was a way in there, but he knew they wouldn't have left the back unguarded. Aaron gritted his teeth, feeling time slip away, feeling the necklace get further and further out of his reach with each passing moment. *Fuck it.* He walked out of the shadows and into the street. These men would be expecting anyone that attacked them to try to take them by surprise. They wouldn't expect him to walk right up to the door—or so he hoped.

One of the guards noticed him before he was halfway across the street. He turned and said something Aaron couldn't hear to his companion, and they both peered into the darkness, their hands on their swords.

“Who's that now?” The second man asked.

“Aaron,” he said as he drew closer, moving to within five feet of the men and standing in the light pouring out from the brothel, his hands held up above his shoulders, “Aaron Envelar. I've got a message for your boss.”

“Aaron—“ the guard paused, shooting a glance at the other one, “but you ... you're supposed to be dead.”

Aaron shrugged, stepping closer. Only a few feet away now. “What can I say? It didn't take.”

He was watching for the moment, expecting it, so when both men went for their swords, he used the second it bought him to dart the rest of the way forward, ramming his fist into the throat of the first. Something crunched under his knuckles, and the man made a strangled, choking sound in his throat, stumbling backward. Aaron was already turning to the other man who'd just freed his blade from its scabbard.

He ducked a clumsy, panicked swipe and stepped into the man's guard, grabbing his head in both hands. He gave a savage twist, and there was an audible *pop* as the guard's neck broke.

Aaron caught him before he could fall, lowering him gently to the ground. The longer he could keep those inside unaware of what was happening the better. The night's silence was split with a loud *crash*, and he snapped his head around in time to see the first man stumbling through the brothel's doorway. The man fell sprawling in the entrance, hacking and choking, his fingers clawing at his ruined throat.

So much for stealth. Aaron drew his sword and rushed past the dying man. Inside, at the bar, three men were turning on their bar stools to look at what had caused the sound. They were obviously drunk, slowed by it, and none of them managed to draw their blades before he was on them, cutting them down.

When he'd finished, he turned to the room at large and was surprised to find it mostly empty save for a table of four men who all seemed to be passed out. Three of them sat reclined in their chairs, their heads lolling, the fourth's head lay on the table, buried in his arms. Judging by the sharp, acrid smoke filling the air, the fools must have been high on tamarang. He looked at them, shaking his head in disgust. He'd be doing them a favor, really. Those who became addicted to tamarang died slow, painful deaths as the herb ate at their insides. He turned to the only other person in the room, a too-skinny, dark-haired young girl who stood behind the bar. At a guess, he would have put her at no older than sixteen. Her face was pale, and she stared at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"I'd get down and stay down if I were you," he said, and she collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, vanishing behind the bar.

Aaron stared after her for a minute then, satisfied, he stalked to the men at the table. None of them so much as stirred a finger as the blade went in and, when he was finished, he felt a strong urge to wash his hands. Instead, he went back to the girl at the bar, looking over to see her cowering against it, her arms pulled tight around her knees in a protective ball. "I'm looking for a man named Lucius."

The girl's mouth trembled, but she pointed an unsteady hand at the stairs, "S-s-second door. On the right."

"Thanks. Stay down here—you'll be okay."

He took the stairs quickly, knowing it was only a matter of time before the rest of Hale's men—and there would be plenty—finished amusing themselves with the goods on offer and decided to go back out to the common room. So far he'd been relying only on luck and the element of surprise, but finding a bunch of his friends dead would have a way of putting a man on edge.

He came to the door, put his ear to it. Feigned screams of ecstasy from inside, a woman. A man, too, cursing and grunting and not feigned in the slightest. He tried the door knob and found it locked. He stepped back and glanced down the hallway once more, assuring himself it was still empty. Then he took two steps and kicked at the door where the latch was.

The wood of the door was cheap, halfway rotten. *Probably, he thought, a place like this, they spend their money on beds and sheets, not doors and locks.* The latch snapped easily and the door flew open, slamming against the inside wall. He stepped inside, swinging it shut behind him.

There was a man and a woman's shout of surprise—both real this time—and he spun toward the sound. A candle burned on the room's nightstand and by the light of it he could see a plain-faced girl straddling a familiar man with a pinched, weasel face and greasy black hair. They were both naked, their eyes wide with shock. He pointed the sword at them, "Another scream like that, and you're dead."

"W-w-what the *fuck?*" The naked man said. He threw the girl off him, and she hit the floor with a gasp of pain. The man moved, going for a knife on the nightstand, and Aaron took a step forward, putting the tip of his blade at the man's throat.

"Lucius," he said, "Good to see you."

The man stared at him in confusion for several seconds then his eyes grew wide with surprise, “A-Aaron?” He said, “you’re supposed to be—“

“Dead? Yeah, that’s what everyone keeps telling me.”

“Do you have a-any idea who owns this place?” Lucius said, his breath coming fast now, his beady eyes searching for a way out, “This is *Hale’s* brothel. He’ll kill you.”

“And here we were getting along so well,” Aaron said, keeping his sword on Lucius’s throat as he drug the room’s only chair beside the bed and sat down. “Here’s the thing, Lucius. I’ve got a couple of questions for you, and I’m afraid we’re going to have to forego the pleasantries. You see, I don’t think I’ve got more than a minute or two before one of your friends finds the presents I left downstairs or comes to investigate what the shout was about. Which means that *you* don’t have more than a minute or two. So please don’t waste my time—I won’t ask you twice. Are we clear?”

Lucius swallowed hard, nodding.

“Good,” Aaron said, “I’m glad we’ve got that settled. Now, tell me. Where can I find Grinner?”

The man’s brow creased in confusion. It hadn’t been the question he’d been expecting, “I ... that is ... I don’t know.”

“I told you, Lucius,” Aaron said, leaning in so that the sword drew a tiny bead of crimson on the man’s throat, “don’t waste my time.”

Lucius tried to recoil, but the headboard of the bed left him nowhere to go, and he held up shaky hands, “No p-p-please, man. Honest, Silent, I don’t know where he is. Nobody does. Shit the bastard’s men don’t even know where to find him.”

“You better give me something better than that, Lucius,” Aaron said, “and quickly. Unless you’re not any good to me. If that’s the case—“

“No, no, wait. Just wait, man, okay?” Lucius said, stumbling over the words in his haste, “I didn’t say that, okay, did I? Sure, sure, of course I help you. After all, we go way

back. Look, what about uh ... shit. It's hard to think with that damned sword at my throat, okay?"

"Be harder to think with it in your throat, don't you think?"

"Alright, man, alright, just relax." Lucius said, staring down the length of steel, "Okay, hold on. I can't help you find Grinner himself, man—I just can't okay? No one can. But I can help you find his man, that fat creepy bastard, the one always wears a suit."

"Claude?"

"Yeah, man. Yeah, that's him."

"Keep talking. Where is he now?"

"Shit, man, I don't—"

Aaron shot a glance at the door. Nobody there. Yet. He leaned forward, moving the sword forward just a bit.

"*Where?*"

"Easy, easy, with that thing, damnit. He's probably at home, okay? In bed or doing whatever weird shit he gets up to. Man's got a house not far from here, okay? Only a few blocks. Down on Marian street, third house on the right past the bridge. Got a fucking red door, okay? You can't miss it."

Marian street. Named after the goddess Mariana, goddess of vengeance and retribution. A good sign or a bad one? "Good. Now, I'm going to leave, but—" Aaron caught movement out of the corner of his eye and spun in time to see the woman coming forward, *lunging* forward, a knife held in two white-knuckled hands. He jerked to the side, out of the chair.

Surprised by his sudden movement, the woman tripped, stumbling, and the knife drove into Lucius's thigh. The man howled in pain and shock, and Aaron winced. Someone would definitely check that—that was not the scream of a man getting what he paid for in a brothel. What he deserved, maybe, but not what he paid for. The woman was frozen, staring at the blood pumping from the naked man's thigh in

shock. Aaron gave her a shove, and she let out a surprised yell of her own as she went tumbling over the bed.

“See you around, Lucius.” Then he was out of the room and running. A door opened on the second floor as he made the top of the stairs, but he didn’t turn to see who it was, leaping down the stairs three and four at a time. He was out the door and in the street when the shouts of fear and confusion erupted from inside the brothel. He glanced around the street and hurried toward a nearby alley. A sound, something whistling in the air, and he grunted, stumbling as something tore into his left arm. He barely managed to catch himself on the wall of the alleyway, and he looked down, shocked to find an arrow sticking out of the meat of his arm.

He spun back to look at the brothel. The bar girl stood in the circle of light spilling into the street, holding a crossbow. The weapon looked big and unwieldy in her small hands. Still, unwieldy or not, she was loading another bolt even as he watched, and her aim had proved too damned accurate the first time. *What you get for being soft, you damned fool*, he cursed himself, and then he was running again, around the corner and disappearing into the night.

About halfway to the house Lucius had indicated, Aaron stopped in the shadows of an alleyway, his senses alert for sounds of pursuit. He waited several minutes but the street remained empty, so he went over his options, wondered why he hadn’t killed Lucius, why he hadn’t killed the girl. The girl had shot him with a crossbow, could have killed him if not for the night, the darkness. And Lucius . . . he’d as much as told the man where he was going. How long before he told Hale? He didn’t think that Hale would make a move on the house of Grinner’s second in command—such a thing would cause a war. It was one thing to have the occasional assassination or theft, but an all-out war wouldn’t be beneficial for either. No, Hale probably wouldn’t send his men to attack Claude’s house, but that wouldn’t stop them from waiting in the street nearby and taking Aaron when he left. *Or, he thought, if you don’t get your ass in motion, they’ll take you before you even get inside.*

His only hope was that, for the next hour or so, Lucius would be thinking more about the hole in his leg than telling his boss what had happened. Aaron gritted his teeth and pushed the arrow through his arm, strangling a scream that threatened to rise up in the back of his throat.

He half-leaned, half-collapsed against the alley wall, fighting down the sudden urge to vomit. He took several slow, ragged breaths, rubbed his hand over suddenly blurry eyes. When his vision cleared he tore off a piece of the new shirt Celes had given him—*gods*, he was going through shirts today—and wrapped the arm, hissing as he pulled the bandage tight. He gave himself another minute to get his breathing under control. Then he stepped out of the alleyway and started down the street. As he walked, he looked back from time to time but, for now at least, the street remained empty.

It wasn't long before he made it to the spot Lucius had indicated. The first thing he noticed was the silence. The night was quiet, absent even of the common pleas and moans of the beggars that seemed to lurk on every street corner in the Downs. But it wasn't just the silence that bothered him—it was the stillness. The houses stood dark, no candles or lanterns burning within. No drunken man shouted at his wife, no unfortunate victim screamed or begged for help. There was only the silence and the stillness, only the sound of the wind in his ears, and the steady rhythm of his boots on the cobbled road.

He knew instinctively that the houses were empty. It was a feel they had, the feel of homes long abandoned, not homes anymore, not really, only the shells of them. It gave him a strange, disconcerting feeling, as if he might be the only man left alive in the world. Then, a realization struck him, and he was relieved to find that strange, disconnected feeling fading. Of course the houses would be empty. If Lucius was correct, Claude's home was about halfway down the street, a modest dwelling that looked no different than any of the others. Aaron had heard stories of Claude's depraved forms of entertainment—as all the denizens of the Downs had. It was no surprise, then, that those who'd once lived on the street had moved. *Or died*, he thought, *there's always that*.

He frowned, studying the distant house. No guards in sight, only the desolate houses, watching him from either end of the street, grim specters in the darkness. But the guards were there, alright. A man like Claude wouldn't go unprotected. If Aaron's life had taught him anything it was that, in the world, but even more so in the Downs themselves, things were rarely what they appeared.

He started down the street again, letting his feet begin to drag, adopting a purposeless shuffle, the way a man might walk if he'd drunk one too many mugs of ale. A subtle thing, not overdoing it, letting his head loll from side to side, his upper body sway uncertainly with each step.

He made his way past Claude's house, his gaze wandering back and forth in what he hoped appeared to be the aimless, purposeless glances of a man deep in his cups. And there it was. An alleyway opposite the house, a man, dressed in black, his eyes barely visible in the darkness. Aaron stumbled to a halt for long enough to let out a loud belch, noting as he did the curtains of one of the houses beside Claude's shift subtly. Then he continued past until the house was out of sight. He turned down an alleyway, out of sight of the road, and his steps became purposeful once more.

At least two guards keeping watch and plenty more within the house itself, that was certain. He hurried through the streets, working his way back and behind the man in the alleyway and sliding the knife from his boot as he did, concealing it against his arm.

The guard was alert, ready. Aaron had barely taken a step down the alley when the man spun, something—Aaron was damnably sure it was a crossbow, given his luck of late—held in his hands. “Who's that?”

Aaron judged the distance, knowing it was too far and then, praying that the darkness would conceal him, “Ah, shit, man. Don't be such a bitch. Claude's got me patrolling, alright?” he said, moving closer, “Just checking to make sure everything's good out here. Hate to think you were gettin' bored.”

The man grunted, the crossbow relaxing in his hands, “Shit, I’ll take bored. Better than being in there, listening to that poor bastard’s screams. Had to hear *that* shit anymore, I’d probably lose my fucking mind.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, thinking, *only ten feet more, maybe less*, “Well, what are you gonna do? The man’s got his tastes.”

The guard must have heard something he didn’t like in Aaron’s tone. He shifted, and the crossbow came up again, “Hey, what did you say your name was? They just checked on me less than an hour ago, and it don’t seem I remember Claude taking on any new—“

Aaron was on him before he finished talking. He knocked the crossbow aside just in time, and the bolt shattered against the cobbled street, a clap of thunder in the near silence. The guard recoiled, perhaps meaning to run, but Aaron rushed into him, slamming him against the wall of the alley. Before the man could react, Aaron grabbed a handful of his hair and jerked his head back, pulling his knife across the guard’s throat. Blood fountained out, spilling over his borrowed clothes, and Aaron clapped a hand over the man’s mouth, holding on grimly as his struggles grew weaker and then stopped altogether. Panting with the effort and from the brief but intense struggle, Aaron lowered the man down until he sat propped against the alley wall, his head sagging over his ruined throat.

Gasping, his left arm throbbing in pain, Aaron rested against the wall of the alley and fought to get his ragged breathing under control. *Damned fool*, he cursed himself, *you got in a hurry, and you nearly got killed for your trouble*. He wondered of what his old master would say if he saw him now but thought he knew well enough. Darrell had never been short on lessons, after all. *Recklessness and desperation will kill a man quicker than any blade. Knowledge and patience—these are a swordsman’s greatest weapons*. It had been one of the man’s favorite lessons, most often after Aaron had lost his temper during a training session, forgetting what he’d learned in his anger and getting plenty of fresh bruises for his trouble.

Reckless and desperate. Well, Aaron was both of those now and no help for it. He would worry about knowledge and patience later, after he got his mother's necklace back. If, of course, he was still alive to worry about anything. For now, he could only count on speed and surprise, neither of which would aid him should someone happen by and find the dead man in the alley before he was finished with his business.

He levered himself off the alley wall, wiped his blade clean on the dead man's tunic, and started back to the house where he'd saw the curtain move in a shuffling run. He came at it from the side, staying in a low crouch beneath the windows as he worked his way around the perimeter of the house. He could hear the muffled sound of voices from inside but was unable to make out the words.

Slowly, carefully, he crept around the house's edge until he was on the side nearest the one Lucius had indicated. He waited, listening for any signs of someone inside watching it. Hearing nothing, he lifted his head up enough to peer into the window. He looked in on what appeared to be a small bedroom. The blankets on the bed were in disarray, indicating recent use but, for now, at least, the room was empty. Before he could second guess himself, he turned and dashed across the empty space between the two houses, expecting at any moment to hear the sounds of alarm. None came, and he made it to the back of Claude's home, out of view of anyone who might take a look out of the other house's windows. He knelt down, leaning against the house's wooden wall, and gave his hammering heart a moment to slow.

The muffled sound of a scream broke the silence, and he tensed, shooting glances around him in the darkness. No men appeared with swords drawn, crossbows fixed, and, in another moment, he realized that the scream had been coming from inside Claude's home, not from the guard station. Taking slow deep breaths and fighting down the urge to run, he made his way around the back of the house, searching for any door or window that he could use to gain entry. He'd made it halfway around the side of the house when he grew convinced that there was no door or window on this side, and he cursed himself for a fool. *Knowledge and patience.* He could hear the

old man's chiding voice as clearly as if he'd been standing right beside him.

Aaron had been in such a hurry that he hadn't studied the layout of the house like he should have, had been so wrapped up in getting his mother's necklace back that he hadn't spared the time he needed to do a thorough reconnaissance of the place. He'd been in a hurry, and he'd been careless, both mistakes that were worth a man's life in a place like the Downs. How long before someone found the dead man? An hour? Less?

Struggling to keep his rising panic under control, Aaron forced himself to continue his search. The darkness was complete, a starless night, and he was forced to feel along the wall with his hands for a window or door. He'd nearly reached the end when a small, almost imperceptible glimmer of orange light caught his eye at the base of the wall. He crept toward it, kneeling down, and a flood of relief washed through him. The light was coming from a small window where it met the ground. A basement. Of course. If the stories about Claude were true—and Aaron had no reason to believe otherwise—the man would want privacy while he sated whatever perverse hungers he had. Knowledge was all well and good, he decided, but luck would do in a pinch.

He examined the window in the dim orange glow of what must have been a candle on the inside of the room. The window was equipped with a simple latch and some kind of material—it appeared to be wool—had been stuffed around its frame in an effort to sound proof the basement. An explanation for the muffled screams he'd heard earlier.

Aaron risked a glance through the window, but it was covered in soot, and he could see nothing but vague outlines of what looked to be a wall. He tried the window and was unsurprised to find it locked. He glanced around him then quickly tore another strip from his shirt—Gods, but he hoped Celes didn't want the clothes back. He wrapped the cloth around his fist and struck the window once, wincing as it broke and listening to the almost musical sound of shattered glass tinkling on the floor below. He waited for several

seconds, holding his breath, anticipating sounds of alarm from inside. When none came, he unfastened the latch, brushing aside pieces of broken glass before easing the window open.

Gods, but I must have Inaden's own luck tonight. But the God of Luck was ever a fickle god, and there was no telling how his dice might land. Refusing to tempt his fate any further, Aaron glanced around once more, ensuring himself that he was alone. Then he pulled his knife from his boot, climbed through the window, and landed in a crouch on the basement's hard stone floor.

He rose and was about to turn when he felt the sharp point of a blade at his back, "Picked the wrong house to rob, friend."

Shit. Aaron tensed and another lesson of his old master came to him. *Never do what they expect, lad. In a duel, as in war, a man's greatest advantage is taking his opponent by surprise.*

The man would expect him to cower, to beg, maybe. He would expect to have the upper hand. What he *wouldn't* expect—or so Aaron hoped—was for the apparent robber to attack.

He spun, grunting as the man's knife traced a line of fire across his back. He had an instant to register the look of surprise on the guard's face before he buried his own blade in the man's throat. The man started to cry out, but Aaron clamped his other hand over the man's mouth, silencing any noise that might give him away.

He held the man that way for several seconds, waiting for his struggles to cease. When they finally did, he eased the corpse to the ground, wincing at the sharp pain where the blade had scored him. He ran a hand along his own lower back and grimaced as it came away red with blood. *Gods, but I've got to be running out of the stuff.*

The cut was shallow though, thank the gods, and he looked up, taking in his surroundings. He was in a large basement, poorly lit by two candles sitting on a table nearby. He noticed a chair—where the guard must have been sitting—beside a set of stairs that went to the first floor of the house.

Another door, closed now, led to a separate room in the basement and it was from this room that the man's screams (no longer muffled, but loud and terrible) came.

The sharp, tangy smell of blood and the sweet, sickening aroma of burning flesh filled his nostrils, and Aaron gagged, barely suppressing the urge to puke. Gods above, how had the guard stood it? The only explanation was that he must have grown accustomed to the smell, being down here so long, and to Aaron's mind there were some things a man should never get used to.

He hesitated, glancing at the stairwell in case someone had heard the guard's struggles and was coming to check. Seeing no one, he drew his sword in one hand and, holding his knife in the other, eased the door open.

Inside, the smell hit him like a physical blow, and he gagged again. The sour taste of vomit coated his throat, and he barely managed to suppress it. A man—or what once had been a man—hung from two thick wooden poles in the center of the room, a wrist and ankle tied to each pole. The man's fingers had all been cut off, the bloody nubs lay scattered on the floor around him, and one of his feet was missing, but that was not the worst of it. The man's nose was gone, and in its place was a gaping hole that looked to have been recently burned. Aaron noted, distractedly, that two steel brands lay in a fireplace, the fire burning lively inside and providing more than enough light to fill the small room.

A man that had to be Claude stood at one corner of the room, his back to Aaron. He'd taken his shirt off, displaying a sickly pale white torso, thick with fat and covered in curly black hair. He only wore a pair of dress trousers, having removed his shoes, too, and was currently sorting through a variety of sharp, cruel instruments that lay spread out on a table in front of him, picking one up and examining it before putting it down and looking at another.

The man hanging from the pole noticed Aaron and began to scream, terribly, pitiable screams with no words in them, only anguish and pain. Aaron doubted if the man could speak at all after what he'd been through. Claude must have taken

the man's screams as a matter of course, not bothering to look back at the man as he continued to look through his tools. "You know," the fat man said in a conversational tone, "it really is quite amazing what the human body can experience and still survive. And I should know," he said with a high-pitched giggle that would have been more at home on a little girl, "you could say that I've made a study of it."

"Ah," he said, holding up what looked like a set of tongs whose edges had been sharpened. "There we are. For example," he said, turning to the man, oblivious of Aaron standing in the doorway, "did you know that with this—a device of my own design—I can pluck out one of your eyeballs in a moment? And yet, still, you will survive it."

The poor bastard made strangled, gargling noises in his throat, spitting out blood, his eyes gazing at Aaron with desperation. Noticing this, Claude sighed, the sound of a man struggling to perform for an audience that didn't appreciate him. "It's about damned time," he said, turning, "I asked for more wood nearly an hour a—" he cut off staring at Aaron, a look of confusion on his face. "Wait a minute you're not—"

Aaron made a sound of disgust and lashed out, hitting the man in the face with the handle of his knife. Claude made a strangled sound of pain and stumbled back, his thick, stumpy arms—covered in blood nearly to the shoulder—waving frantically before he fell down in a sitting position, both hands covering his nose. "Do you have any idea—" he started, his voice muffled.

"Yeah," Aaron interrupted, taking slow breaths in an effort to keep down his rising gorge, "I know exactly who you are, you sick bastard. Now, if you so much as make a sound when I don't ask for it, if you move, I'll carve you up. I'll make what you did to this poor bastard look like a child's work. Are we clear?" A lie, that. He might kill the man, sure, but he'd never be able to bring himself to do the things that had been done to the man hanging from the wooden beams.

The initial shock of the blow gone, Claude let his hands fall into his lap, staring at Aaron with eyes that didn't show

fear or even anger, only a dead sort of surety. “Oh, if it isn’t Aaron Envelar. And how are you today, Mr. Envelar?”

Aaron frowned, “How do you know my name?”

Claude smiled, displaying a row of perfect teeth stained red with blood. “Oh, I make it my business to know about anybody of relevance in the Downs. Still, I must confess to a certain degree of surprise in seeing you walking around. I would have thought Hale’s men would have finished the job.” He made a tsking sound in his throat, “You really never can get good help these days.”

“I’m harder to kill than I look,” Aaron said, wincing as a wave of dizziness—probably from blood loss, if he had to guess—came over him.

The fat man’s smile widened, “I’m excited to hear it. I find that too many of my,” he gestured vaguely at the man hanging from the posts, “experiments, die prematurely. I will make it a point of taking my time with you. After, of course, I get some practice in on everyone you care about.”

Aaron grunted a laugh, “That’s a short list there, fat man.”

“Oh?” Claude asked, raising an eyebrow, “Is that so? Everybody has someone, Mr. Envelar. Or does the barmaid ... what is her name? Ah, yes, Celes. Does she mean so little to you? And what of her boss? May, isn’t it?” He nodded, “An admirable woman. I wonder how long she would last.”

Aaron took a step closer, pointing his sword at the chubby man’s throat, “Another word about either of them, and I’ll kill you now.”

The man laughed, a tittering, girlish laugh that made Aaron’s skin crawl, “No, Mr. Envelar. You won’t. You see, most men—and women, too, of course—go out of their way to avoid me. I doubt very much that whatever urge motivated you to come into my house and attack me would be satisfied by my quick death. Or am I very much mistaken? Feel free to show me, rather than tell. Words are, after all, notoriously misleading.”

“*P-P-please.*” The voice was rough and hard to understand, full of pain and despair, and Aaron turned to see the hanging man staring at him, a look in the man’s eyes bordering on madness. “Help ... *me.*”

Aaron looked back to Claude, “If you so much as move, I’ll kill you, and my motivations can be damned.” Then he walked over to the wounded man. Up close, the man’s wounds were even more shocking, and it was a wonder he was alive at all. He would have bled out long ago if not for what were clearly the burn marks of brands on his wounds, cauterizing them and keeping the blood from escaping. “*Please,*” the man wheezed again.

Aaron nodded, meeting the man’s eyes, “I’m sorry.” He was still watching the man’s eyes when he slid the sword into his heart. The man’s breath left him in a sigh that sounded almost relieved, and his body slumped in death.

“Now, *that* was uncalled for,” Claude spoke from his position seated on the floor, a petulance in his voice like a child who has had his favorite toy taken away. “I wasn’t finished with him.”

Aaron turned back to him, his grip tightening on his sword’s handle. “Who was he, that you would do this to him? Why?”

Claude shrugged as if it was of no importance, “I don’t know who he was. As for why” He smiled again, a sly, secretive expression, “Well, let’s chalk it up to man’s eternal quest for knowledge, shall we?”

Aaron resisted the urge to plunge his blade through the fat man’s heart. Barely. “I need you to tell me where Grinner is.”

Claude tittered, his hand going to his ample stomach and leaving a crimson hand print on the pale flesh, “Oh, Mr. Envelar. As if Grinner would trust a coward to be his second in command. And if I don’t tell you, then what? You’ll kill me? All men die—I’ve seen enough to know it. Truly, you are an optimist if you thought it would be so easy.”

“I’m not an optimist,” Aaron said, kneeling beside him. Before the fat man could react, he reached forward, jerking one of the man’s hands toward him, and brought his knife down in one smooth motion.

Claude’s severed finger fell to the ground, and Aaron clamped his hand over the man’s mouth, muffling his scream. “You see,” He said as Claude’s screams quieted to desperate, breathless moans, “I’m a realist. And, realistically, I assume that you’ll tell me what I want to know long before I finish with your fingers. But, then, I could be wrong. I guess we’ll see.”

Claude leaned away from him, true fear in his eyes now as he stared at the severed digit lying on the floor beside him. Aaron had been a sellsword for a long time, and he knew some things that the average person didn’t. One of those things was that it wasn’t the actual pain of such a wound that worked on a man the most, but the knowledge that a part of him was gone, had been *taken*. The knowledge that the man would always be less than he had been, that he had lost some irreplaceable part of himself.

It was that knowledge he saw working in Claude’s eyes now. When the man’s groans grew quiet, Aaron took his hand away. “I wouldn’t worry so much, Claude. It’s just a finger, you know. You’ve got plenty of them. Nine more, in fact.”

The fat man met his gaze, cupping his hand around the wound, and there *was* anger there now, there was no mistaking it. “What do you want to know?” He asked, all traces of humor gone.

“First, I’m going to need to know where Grinner is.”

“You’re a fool. Even if I tell you where Grinner is, do you think you’re seriously going to be able to get to him? What, do you think he’s hiding in some room just waiting to be plucked like some drunken maiden’s virtue?” He winced, “You’ll never even get close.”

Aaron grabbed the man’s hand, his knife licked forward, and another finger landed on the floor in a spurt of blood. He clamped his hand over the fat man’s mouth again and waited

for the screams to stop. “Eight more to go, Claude, and then I start on your feet. It sounded to me like you said even *if* you tell me where Grinner is. And let me be clear,” he said, leaning in, his face inches from the fat man’s, “you’re not just going to tell me where Grinner is—you’re going to show me.”

“Show you?” Claude asked, desperation and pain filling his voice, “he’ll kill me.”

Aaron cocked his head to the side, “Kill you? Gods, Claude, what do you think I’m going to do? The only difference is that I’m going to make sure you suffer before you go.”

“Fine, okay,” Claude said, his wounded hand cupped in the other, his body quivering, “I’ll tell you just ... help me. The wound ... I need a bandage.”

Aaron nodded, “I’ve got a better idea.” He walked over to the fireplace where the ends of the metal brands had grown a bright red. He pulled on a glove apparently set on the table for the purpose and grabbed one.

“Wait,” Claude said as Aaron approached, his good hand held up as if to ward him off, “Just a bandage is all I need. To keep the blood in.”

Aaron ignored him, grabbing his hand and jerking him forward. “Oh, and if you scream, Claude, we’ll see just how much “experimenting” I can do before your men arrive.” The fat man wouldn’t stop struggling, so Aaron was forced to put one foot on his wrist as he brought the branding iron down.

An instant, sizzling sound, followed closely by the smell of burned flesh, and this time Aaron didn’t have to fight back to need to retch. He waited for several seconds, the fat man letting out desperate mewling sounds and gasps then finally pulled the brand away. He grabbed the man’s wrist, examining his work and shrugged, “There. That should stop the bleeding.” Two of the man’s remaining fingers had been pressed into the brand and the flesh on them had been burned into flaking ash.

“You ... bastard,” Claude gasped, looking at his hand, an expression of terror on his face.

“Sure,” Aaron said nodding, “I’ve been called worse. Now, I’m assuming you have a back way out of this place. A way of bringing in your “experiments” without being seen.”

“I don’t know what you’re—“ Claude hesitated as Aaron raised an eyebrow then he swallowed, tears of pain leaking down his face. “Yes.”

“Show me.”

Claude rose unsteadily, cradling his wounded hand in front of him, and made his way to the wall behind the dead man. He grabbed what Aaron had taken to be a candle holder mounted on the wall and pulled it down, and the seemingly solid stone wall slid to the side revealing man-sized opening. Aaron nodded and tossed the fat man a rag that had been hanging from a nail in the wall, “Clean yourself up, Claude, and put your shirt on. I wouldn’t want anyone thinking I was walking around with a corpse.” As the fat man dressed, Aaron went back into the other room and dragged the corpse of the dead guard inside the tunnel entrance.

“Alright,” He said, turning and glancing around the room, “that should do. Oh, and Claude?”

Grinner’s second turned back to him, a wary expression on his face.

“Grab your fingers will you? I wouldn’t want any of your men doing the math and wondering why your “experiment” had twelve fingers. Better if they just think you up and disappeared.”

The tunnel came out in the basement of one of the houses further down the street and, Aaron was surprised to find it unguarded. “Not even a single man, eh, Claude?” He said, glancing around the abandoned, dust-covered interior of

the basement. “Well, I guess spending your life working with the worst the Downs has to offer doesn’t exactly inspire trust, does it? But what of those that helped you dig the tunnel? I can’t imagine you digging it all out yourself.”

“They’re dead,” Claude said, his hand still cradled against his chest. He’d been silent as they trudged through the dirt passage, Aaron’s sword held at his back and even now the words came out reluctantly. Aaron supposed tortures lost some of their appeal when you became the tortured.

“Well. Of course they are. No one left to tell your secret, no one left to worry about. Still ... kind of leaves you in a spot now, doesn’t it?”

Claude didn’t answer, only stared at him with that cold, dead gaze. “Well,” Aaron said, motioning to the stairs with his sword, “Lead on.”

They walked for over an hour, sticking to the back alleys, avoiding those few people they saw walking in the street, and the sun was just peaking over the horizon when the fat man finally stopped, “We’re here.”

Aaron stared out at the street from where they stood in the alleyway. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

He looked out upon God’s Row, one of the finest streets in Avarest. No run-down buildings here, no beggars sitting in the street in rags, their hands held up in desperation. The city guard would have made sure of it. Instead, men and women dressed in their finery, brightly colored silks and velvets, walked along the streets or traveled them in coaches, stopping from time to time to admire some bobble or piece of clothing at one of the many high-end shops lining the lane.

The shop owners did not shout their prices, huckstering to passersby as was common in the Downs. Instead, tailors and silversmiths and merchants of all sorts bowed to their well-dressed, well-moneyed guests and scraped and complimented them on their most discerning choice of this potion or that trinket, their tones always admiring, always slightly apologetic. Aaron shook his head in wonder, noting that the shop owners wore clothes and jewelry almost as nice as that of

their patrons, a single piece of which would have been worth a fortune to a man or woman living in the Downs.

City guards, their uniforms washed and bright, patrolled the street, smiling and nodding to men and women who rarely deigned to notice their presence and, when they did, did so with the air of someone who'd sat down for tea and noticed some foul scent on the air. "You mean to tell me," he said, unable to keep the incredulity from his voice, "that Grinner, your boss, works at one of these shops?"

Claude sneered at him, apparently emboldened by the crowds of people, "Don't be a fool. Of course he doesn't. He's there." He motioned with his head toward a large building in the center of the street.

Aaron took in the building with its large, gold-trimmed marble pedestals, and raised an eyebrow as he noticed the stylized image etched into the door. It was the image of a woman's outline lying recumbent on a golden divan. The woman was naked save for a gold-trimmed tiara, but her impossibly long hair managed to maintain her modesty while hinting at what was hidden beneath. He'd seen the image enough to know it for what it was—Aliandra, the Goddess of Beauty and Youth. In the last few years, the minor goddess had grown increasingly popular with the rich upper class. Unsurprisingly, worship of Aliandra had never taken root in the Downs—it was hard to worry about beauty when your children starved and each trip you made to work gave you about even odds of getting mugged or worse.

"A church." He said, his voice flat, "Your boss works for a priest."

"Grinner works for no one," Claude said, but Aaron was barely paying him any attention. He was staring at the milling crowd of people and trying to decide how he was going to get at Grinner—if, indeed, he was in the church—and get his mother's necklace back.

"And it won't matter to you either way." There was something in the fat man's tone that Aaron didn't like, and he turned to see Claude smiling that slow, cruel smile, "Tell me,"

Claude said, “would you like to watch when I do my experiments on the barmaid? Would you like to watch her beg me to kill her? I believe I’d like that.”

“Watch yourself, Claude,” Aaron said, “you’ve still got plenty of fingers left.”

The fat man grinned, “What are you going to do, Mr. Envelar? Kill me in front of all these people? Torture me, maybe? With city guards no less than a yell away? I doubt that. I doubt that very much.” He winked, “I’ll be seeing you soon, Mr. Envelar.”

He stepped out into the street before Aaron could grab him, weaving his way through the crowd and heading in the direction of the church. “*Shit,*” Aaron hissed. He hesitated in a moment of indecision. The man had been right—there were too many people here, too many witnesses. Not to mention the fact that the city guard—seemingly everywhere, now that he looked—would be on him before he even got his sword out of its sheathe.

His mind raced, and he seriously considered turning around and going back to the Downs. After all, he knew where Grinner was now, could find him again. *But he’ll move. Claude will tell him what happened, and you’ll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life, always wondering if today would be the day that you were taken. Or Celes. Or May.* In the end, the thought of May or Celes hanging from two wooden posts while the fat man performed his perverted experiments decided him, and he stepped into the street.

Claude was taking his time, confident in his escape, and it didn’t take Aaron long to catch up with him. “Ah, Mr. Envelar,” the fat man said, smiling widely, “shall we visit Grinner together th—“

He cut off, as Aaron lashed out in one quick motion, bringing the ridge of his hand as hard as he could into the man’s throat. Something crunched beneath the blow, but he didn’t slow, continuing to press his way through the crowd and ignoring the rattling wheezes behind him.

He was nearly at the Church gate when a woman in the crowd screamed, then someone else joined in. He turned to see several of the city guardsmen rushing forward, not toward him, thank the gods, but toward where a growing circle of people watched a man thrash and kick on the cobbles. The man's face was turning a dark shade of blue, and those around him watched, unhelping, as if they'd paid for seats at the spectacle. "See ya around, Claude," he said before walking through the gates and into the church.

Inside, the church was dimly lit, the only illumination coming from the sun streaming through the stained glass windows and falling on the floor and pews in dappled splashes of red and blue and green.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the morning service isn't for another two hours."

A deep, mellifluous voice. Aaron turned to see a man standing on the small stage of the church on which sat a four foot high wooden podium. The man walked closer, a peaceful smile on his face. He wore pristine white robes, but his garments did little to hide his thickly muscled chest and arms, and even in the poor light cast through the windows, Aaron could see that the man had a strong jaw line and features that belonged on some ancient hero of legend. The big man was smiling, holding his hands up in apology, but Aaron noted that his knuckles were calloused, and his hands and arms looked big enough to crush boulders, if he got the desire.

"I'm here to see the priest," Aaron said, scanning the church for anyone else but seeing no one.

The man bowed his head slightly, "I'm sorry, sir, but his Holiness is resting, just now. Communing with the goddess takes much out of him."

Aaron snorted. He'd heard of the strange worshipping that took place in the temples of Aliandra, had heard stories of

orgies and more, dedicated to the Goddess of Beauty and Youth. He turned to fully face the big man, throwing his cloak behind one shoulder and exposing the sword strapped to his back, “Ah, well. I guess I’ll just talk to Grinner then.”

The man’s eyes narrowed and suddenly he was charging forward, shockingly fast for a man his size. *Ah Pit*, Aaron had time to think, then the man bulled into him with the force of a stampeding horse, and the next thing he knew, Aaron was flying through the air. He struck a wooden pew, knocking it over, and the air was knocked out of him as the pew fell over. He tumbled across the floor, finally coming to a gasping, groaning stop. He reached unsteadily for the handle of his sword, still gasping, fighting to get his breath back, but thick fingers settled on his shoulders in a crushing grip, jerking him off the ground as if he weighed no more than a child. He struggled against the man’s hold, but he might as well have been trying to move a mountain for all the good it did him and, in another moment, he was flying again.

This time he struck the solid wood podium. Something gave in his wounded arm with a sickening *crack*, and he screamed. Gasping, grunting with pain and effort, he turned to look back at his attacker and watched his assailant approaching through blurry, unfocused eyes. The man was approaching slowly now, confident that he had the upper hand. Aaron reached for the sword at his back with unsteady fingers, but they found nothing, and panic gripped him as he noticed his blade lying halfway across the room between him and his attacker.

He started to crawl toward it and had barely made any progress when the big man was on him again. Aaron curled up into a protective ball, and the big man grabbed him by the front of the shirt and pulled him off the floor once more. “You shouldn’t have come here,” he said, the mask of fury on his face making him appear like some righteous god bent on destruction.

Aaron’s vision swam, but he lashed out with the knife he’d taken from his boot when the man grabbed him. He stabbed the blade into the inside of his assailant’s arm opposite

his elbow. The big man roared in pain, his grip loosening, and Aaron fell to the ground in a heap. He'd risen to his hands and knees when the man's foot struck him in the chest. He felt a rib crack, and he tumbled across the floor until he fetched up against another pew.

He pulled himself up until he was sitting with his back against the pew and managed to raise blurry eyes in time to see the man coming for him again. The white sleeve of the man's robe was coated in blood, the knife still protruding from his arm, but if the wound pained him, he gave no sign. Still, pain or not, the big man's movements were less sure, more sluggish, and as he reached forward, Aaron jerked the knife out of his arm and plunged it into the side of his attacker's slab of a thigh, about three fingers down from the groin, as he'd been shown so long ago.

The big man roared in pain and anger and a fist that felt more like a boulder struck Aaron's shoulder which immediately went numb and senseless. Darkness threatened at the corners of his vision, but Aaron grunted with effort, reaching up with his good hand and grabbing hold of the handle of the knife. He wrenched the blade sideways, tearing through the meat of the man's inner thigh.

Blood fountained out in a spray, covering Aaron, and the big man's grip loosened. Aaron fell back to the ground with a grunt and watched the big man stumble back, a look of confused disbelief on his face. He pawed ineffectually at the knife in his leg for a moment before falling to his knees, his gaze meeting Aaron's, uncomprehending.

"Severed ... the arteries," Aaron gasped by way of explanation, his teeth gritted against the pain. "You need those."

The big man's face twisted in fury, and he reached for Aaron only to collapse, his face striking the floor with a loud *thud*. Aaron lay there for a minute, gasping, then he levered himself up to a sitting position, his back leaned against the pew. His left arm hung useless and unresponsive, and the sharp, biting pain in his chest told him that he'd definitely cracked a rib, maybe more than one.

The dark river of unconsciousness threatened to surge forward, and Aaron shook his head, forcing it back with a will. He had no doubt that if he fell asleep here, now, he would not wake up again. He grabbed hold of the pew with his good hand and pulled himself to his feet, hissing at the pain in his chest and arm.

Slowly, gingerly, he bent to retrieve his knife and noticed a silver necklace on the man's neck, something hanging from it. He pulled the necklace over the man's head and saw that a key dangled from the silver chain. He stuffed the key into the pocket of his trousers before pulling his knife out of the big man's thigh. It came free with a sickening, liquid sound, and he wiped it on the man's white robe before sliding it back into his boot. That done, he shuffled across the room and grabbed his sword from where it had fallen, drawing the blade and slinging the sheathe across his back.

He glanced around the room and noted a door behind the altar, started toward it. He was just passing the altar when he lost his balance and was forced to catch himself on its wooden surface. He paused for a moment, taking a few slow breaths, as deep as his wounded rib would allow, then shuffled to the door.

He was surprised to find the door unlocked, and he stepped through it, easing it shut behind him. A short hallway stretched ahead of him. A candle burned in a silver candle holder halfway down the hallway's length, and by its uncertain light he saw several doors on either wall. He limped to the first door and looked inside, grunting in surprise. The walls, ceiling, and floor of the room had been painted in a blue so bright it was almost painful to look upon. An enormous bed took up almost the entire floor, the only piece of furniture in the room, and its sheets and pillows matched the color of the room itself, making it difficult to tell where the bed began and ended. No doubt an intentional illusion.

He passed a room of green, another of black, and another of crimson, all of them a match for the blue room, all of them unoccupied. The worshippers of Aliandra, it seemed, expressed the worship of their goddess in some peculiar ways.

He didn't bother to look at the rest as he passed them, instead making his way to the door at the end of the hall. He reached the door only to find it locked, so he retrieved the key he'd found around the big man's neck and was relieved to find that it fit. He took a deep breath, readied his sword, and walked inside.

The room was twice as large as the others he'd seen, and he was surprised to find it normal, if richly appointed. A large desk sat in one corner, stacked high with papers. Letters from parishioners, perhaps? Or kill orders for some unfortunate souls who'd earned Grinner's displeasure? Aaron found that he didn't much care; it wasn't what he'd come for, after all. Several bookshelves stood against the walls, a fortune in books and scrolls piled high on their shelves, and a large fireplace sat on one side of the room. At the opposite end, separated from the rest of the room by a thin gauzy curtain of silk, sat a bed as large the ones in the rooms he'd passed, though this one, at least, was covered with simple satin sheets that seemed almost abnormally modest when compared to the others.

A man lay in the bed asleep. He was dressed in silk night clothes and a black mask covered his eyes. He was older than Aaron had expected, his shoulder length silver hair tied in a tail. He was thin too, only just past the point of emaciation. Aaron watched him as he closed the door, not bothering to ease it shut.

The man stirred at the sound but did not remove the mask he wore, "Not now, Gregory, please," he said, a slight smile on his face, "I'm very tired, and the congregation will be here in a few hours. Later though ... well ... we'll see."

Instead of answering, Aaron shuffled to the desk, grabbing the wooden chair behind it and dragging it toward the side of the bed. The chair scraped against the hardwood floor, and the man in the bed frowned as Aaron pulled it up beside the bed and eased his way into it, wincing as his wounded rib complained at the movement.

"Really, Gregory," the man said, pulling the mask off with one hand, "I thought I was clear about—" he paused as he

saw Aaron sitting there, his wide eyes noting the sword in his hand. “You’re not Gregory.”

“No.”

“Gregory,” the man said, louder. “Gregory!”

“You’ll have to talk quite a bit louder than that if you want him to hear you, I’m afraid. Even still, I wouldn’t expect an answer anytime soon.”

The man looked at Aaron, at the blood covering his clothes and hands, and his eyes widened, his expression turning incredulous as he sat up in bed. “What have you done, fool? Who would *dare* to bring violence into the house of the gods? A curse will be brought on your life, a damnation that will follow you for all of your short miserable days.”

Aaron thought of his parents, murdered when he was a child, thought of the orphanage in which he’d grown up, in which he’d been beaten and tortured. “You’ll have to excuse me if I’m not impressed, *father*, but I’ve been cursed since the day of my birth, and a man can only be damned once. Or should I call you Grinner?”

The incredulous expression of fear and outrage vanished from the man’s face in an instant, and he met Aaron’s gaze with cold, calculating eyes. “I don’t know who you are, but if you’ve hurt Gregory....”

“Not hurt. Killed. I thought I’d made that clear. And my name’s Aaron. Aaron Envelar.”

Tightly-controlled fury blazed in the man’s eyes, but when he spoke, his voice was calm, “Envelar ... I know that name. Ah, yes. The one they call the “Silent Blade.” I don’t know what business has brought you here,” he said, speaking with the authority of a king to his servants instead of a man caught unawares in his bed, still dressed in his night clothes, “But you should not have hurt him. He was *mine*, Mr. Envelar, and no one takes what’s mine.”

Aaron smiled, though there was no humor in it, “Ah. If that upsets you, I don’t suppose it’d be a great time to mention that you’ll need to look for a new second in command.”

The silver-haired man's eyes widened slightly, the only indication of surprise or emotion at all. "Claude was a dog, loyal, slightly stupid, prone to making messes, but he, too, was mine." He shook his head as if in wonder, "I don't know what drives you, Envelar, but you have doomed not only yourself but all those you care about. I will visit such vengeance upon those you love—"

Aaron tapped the man on the shoulder with the flat of his blade, "Careful, Grinner. Your man said much the same, before he died. I don't take well to threats, never have." He shrugged, "I'm told I have temper problems. Now, then, your men attacked an inn tonight, one called the Maiden's Haven. A shitty dive, really, but, unfortunately for you, it also just happened to be the shitty dive at which I was staying."

"And what?" Grinner said, "Those fools were acting against my orders. If you lost someone, I'm sure we can come to some kind of arrangement. I am a very rich man."

Aaron leaned back in the chair, regarding the old man with a kind of wonder. Not only did he seem almost unconcerned about the sword being brandished in his face, he also seemed to think that a man who'd fought his way to him to take revenge for a murdered loved one would be willing to take a sack of coins for his trouble. Aaron studied him, shaking his head, "You're serious."

Grinner shrugged, his hands held up, a smile on his face, "In my experience, gold has a way of soothing even the most terrible of hurts."

"I don't want your money."

For the first time, a look of uncertainty entered Grinner's eyes. "No? What then? I'm certain we can come to some kind of arrangement. Who was it you lost? A wife? A brother? I'm sure that—"

"My necklace."

A look of confusion crossed the old man's features, "A necklace?"

Aaron nodded, barely keeping his patience, “Your men took my necklace from me—I want it back.”

“A necklace.” Grinner said, his voice doubtful. “Fine, if a necklace is what you want, I’ll buy you a dozen of them. The finest you can want, only—“

“Not *a* necklace. My necklace. I want it back. It’s a simple one, has a golden chain.”

“Ah,” Grinner said, a malicious glint in his eye, “I think I know the one of which you speak. A woman in my employ brought it to me, a fool thinking to make up for her disobedience. I had her executed, of course. An example had to be made. It is important that my people understand—”

“I don’t give a *damn* about your people,” Aaron said, his blade coming to Grinner’s throat, “Where did you put the necklace?”

Grinner waived a hand dismissively, oblivious or unconcerned by Aaron’s rising anger, “It was rubbish, a whore’s bobble, nothing more. I burned it.” He gestured to the fireplace. “Now, please, let’s stop posturing, and you tell me what your price is, so we can get this done with. I’ve a sermon in little more than an hour, and I must begin preparing.”

His heart galloping in his chest, Aaron jerked to his feet, barely noticing as the chair tipped over. He shuffled to the fireplace and fell to his knees in front of it, sifting through the ashes of a recent fire with his good hand, his motions growing more frantic, more desperate, with each passing moment. He was beginning to despair when his fingers brushed something metallic, and he reached deeper, pulling the object out.

It was his mother’s necklace, he saw that immediately, or, at least, a piece of it. The gold band had been ruined, burned and warped in the heat so that it was barely recognizable, the piece he held less than half the size of his little finger. A red rage descended over him, and the next thing he knew, he was kneeling over the old man who was sprawled on the floor, his face bloody and bruised, and Aaron held his knife inches from the man’s throat. He didn’t remember touching the man, didn’t even remember crossing the room.

It felt as if he couldn't get enough air, and he gasped in deep breaths, his knife wavering at the old man's throat. A thought struck him then, the logical part of his mind reasserting itself. If he killed Grinner, the man would only be replaced with another man or woman. It was the thing about crime bosses—there was always someone ready to take their place. And the man or woman who took over would make it their first order of business to kill Aaron. Not because of any love for Grinner but, as the man had said, an example would have to be made. And it wasn't as if he'd hidden what he was about—half the Downs knew by now. If he killed Grinner, they'd come for him, and they wouldn't stop there. They'd make good on the old man and Claude's threats, targeting those he cared about. May was clever, and she was resourceful, but she couldn't match Hale or Grinner's army of criminals, not in a war. She and Celes would be killed, and it would be his fault.

Suddenly weary beyond belief, wanting nothing but to crawl into a bed and sleep for a week, Aaron stepped back from the man and slid the knife back into his boot. The old man must have seen some of his thoughts on his face because he smiled past his busted lips, "Ah. Not a complete fool then."

Aaron grunted, "I'd be careful now, old man. I might just surprise you. Now, this is how it's going to be. I'm going to leave, but let me explain something to you. I know who you are, and I know *where* you are. If anything happens to those I care about—if one of them so much as stubs their toe, and I think you had anything to do with it, I swear to the gods, major and minor both, I will destroy everything in this world that you care about. I will pull your house down around you, and I will leave your loved ones in pieces scattered in the streets. If I so much as think I see one of your men following me, I will set such vengeance in motion against you that men will speak of it for decades, and all that you love will burn around you until even the food you eat will taste like ashes in your mouth. Do you understand me?"

The smugness had left the old man's expression, and he stared at Aaron like a man staring at some previously

unknown animal. When he spoke his tone was quiet, “I understand.”

Aaron nodded and started to leave. He made it halfway across the room before he paused, thinking of the tavern keeper, Benjin, lying in a spreading pool of his own blood, the question in his eyes, but dying before he could ask it. He turned back to where Grinner was still lying on the ground, watching him. “One more thing. There was a girl, pretty, around twenty. Your men took her from the inn.”

Grinner nodded slowly, “The same ones who brought me the nec—“ he paused and tried again, “they brought her to me an hour ago, maybe two, but she was, shall we say, not my type. I gave her to my men.”

Aaron gritted his teeth, “Gods, but you’re a bastard, aren’t you?”

The older man shrugged as if it made no difference. “Where?” Aaron said, “And make it fast. Along with a bad temper, I’ve been told I have a tendency to make bad decisions when I’m angry. You might want to think about that, just now.”

He listened as the man spoke and, when he was finished, Aaron went to the desk and grabbed a handful of papers from it. Grinner made no move to protest, only watched him with wary eyes. “You’ve taken something I care about from me,” Aaron said, meeting the man’s eyes, “Now I’m going to take something you care about from you. Consider us even.”

He left the man there, making his way down the hall until he came to the single candle shedding its weak light from its place on the wall. He held the papers up to the flame until they caught then he walked into one of the rooms—it turned out to be the red one—and held the papers against the bed covers until they, too, were blazing. He let the fire burn, covering his mouth and nose with the sleeve of his shirt against the rising smoke. Once the pillows had caught, he grabbed two of them and tossed them into the adjacent rooms, watching as the flames spread. Once he was satisfied, he pulled the hood of his brown cloak down to cover his face and

shuffled out of the church and into the street. A small crowd had gathered to watch the flames, but they were too preoccupied with the growing blaze to pay any mind to the figure in the tattered cloak as it made its way past them. City guards rushed toward the fire, screaming for water, but Aaron didn't turn back to watch.

Ahead of him, in the street, a well-dressed man and woman climbed out of a stage coach, apparently having decided to stop and witness the spectacle. Aaron climbed inside the coach before it could leave and stuck his knife in the driver's face, a chubby man who quailed at the sight of the bared steel, "Take me to the Downs and fast." The driver's eyes went wide, and he nodded, snapping at the reins. The coach lurched into motion, and Aaron laid his head back on the cushioned seat as the church went up in flames behind him. He did not look back.

Aaron had barely climbed out of the coach when the driver laid on the reins and the horses and cart both disappeared down the cobbled street. He didn't blame the man—stage coaches and fine horses, such things had no place in the Downs. Aaron stared at the house asking himself, not for the first time, what he was doing here. His mother's necklace was gone; there was nothing here for him. He could leave, he *should* leave. There was no telling how many men were in there. His left arm still hung uselessly at his side. Each time he tried to move it, it felt as if it was filled with broken glass, and each breath was an agony as his broken rib voiced its complaints.

He should leave; he knew that, but he couldn't seem to shake the memory of the tavern keeper's eyes, of the question they'd asked, even if the man himself could not. *Ah, Pit take it.* The door was unlocked, and he stepped inside, his sword held in his good hand. The entry way was dark, but the sound of men laughing and a woman's cries for help came from

somewhere within. Light spilled into the hallway from a room to the left. Sighing to himself, Aaron limped through the doorway.

Three men holding glasses of ale stumbled and laughed as they pushed a familiar woman between them, tearing pieces off of her clothes as they did. The woman's dress was in tatters, and though she tried to fight back against her attackers, she was clearly disoriented, her struggles weak and desperate. The men were so engrossed in their game that they didn't notice Aaron's presence until he slid his sword through the back of the first. The man grunted in shock and pain, and his glass of ale fell from his nerveless fingers, shattering on the floor. The second man was turning in surprise when Aaron lashed out with his blade, and the man's head went tumbling to the floor to fall among the broken glass.

The third stumbled backward, nearly tripping over a table, his hands held up, "Look, mister, we wasn't doin' nothing. Just having some fu—"

The man's words cut off as Aaron stepped forward and rammed the sword through his stomach. The man gasped, his hands fluttering around the blade in his stomach, and Aaron leaned forward, forcing the steel in deeper. The would-be rapist pawed at the blade impaling him, slicing the palms of his hands open in a vain attempt to pull the sword out.

Aaron watched him struggle for a moment, his face expressionless, before he wrenched the blade to the side and pulled it free. The man's guts tumbled onto the floor in front of him, and he fell to the ground, gasping, his eyes wide with shock as he took in his own innards. Aaron watched as the man reached for the bloody ropes of intestine, trying to gather them up with shaking hands.

Aaron returned the sword to its sheathe, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He turned to the girl and saw her staring at him with a look of terror on her face, trying and failing to cover herself with the now ruined dress.

He stumbled, half sitting and half falling into one of the room's chairs. "I'm not ... going to hurt you," he said,

between shaky breaths. “Your father ... he sent me.”

“My father,” she said, her words so quiet he had to strain to hear them, “is ... is he....”

“He’s dead,” Aaron said, wincing as he brought a hand to his wounded rib.

The woman let out a wail of grief, burying her face in her hands and forgetting to cover herself in her grief. Aaron used his good hand to gingerly remove his cloak and threw it to her. “Here. It’s bloody, but it’ll do until you get something else.”

The woman caught the robe and put it on absently, her gaze never leaving the dying man that still lay writhing on the floor. “They ... killed him,” she said, “they were going to—“

“I know.”

Suddenly, her face twisted with rage, and she walked to the corner of the room where the men had left their weapons. She drew a sword from its scabbard awkwardly, struggling with the weight of it as she half carried half drug it back to the wounded man. She watched the man’s struggles for several moments then, with a scream of fury and grief, she brought the sword down, and the blade hacked deeply into the man’s arm, tearing into the flesh. The man begged for mercy, but if the woman heard, she gave no sign, bringing the blade down again and again until the man’s pleas turned to screams, and his screams turned to silence. Aaron rubbed a weary hand across his face and watched her set about her bloody work. When she was finished, the remains were barely recognizable as a man at all and blood covered her face and hands.

“Maybe not the quickest way, but it’ll do,” Aaron said. “It’ll do.”

The girl let the sword drop to the ground, but she did not answer, only stood gasping for air, staring at the product of her labors. Aaron sighed and levered his way to his feet. He made his painstaking way to the girl and put a hand on her shoulder. “Listen. Go to an inn called the Traveler’s Rest and ask for

May. Tell her Aaron sent you—she'll see that you're taken care of."

The woman nodded slowly, distractedly, "They ... they *were* monsters. Weren't they?"

"Oh yes," Aaron said, sighing, "They were. All men are monsters."

"Not all men," she said, turning to him, a desperate hope in her eyes, "not you. You saved me."

Aaron took his hand from her shoulder, seeing the bloody hand print he'd left there, thinking that killing was easy, too damned easy—it was the living that was hard. "Don't be a fool, girl," he said, starting for the door, "I'm the biggest monster of them all."

I hope you enjoyed *The Silent Blade*. You can read more of Aaron and his companions in [***A Sellsword's Compassion, Book one of the Seven Virtues***](#). Alternatively, you can pick up [***The Son of the Morning, Book one of the Nightfall Wars***](#). To be the first to know when the next book is out, sign up for my mailing list [here](#). If you've enjoyed *The Silent Blade*, please take a second or two and leave me an honest review—I'd be happy to hear from you.

You can leave your review here:

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About the Author



Jacob Peppers lives in Georgia with his wife and three dogs. He is an avid reader and writer and when he's not exploring the worlds of others, he's creating his own. His short fiction has been published in various markets, and his short story, "The Lies of Autumn," was a finalist for the 2013 Eric Hoffer Award for Short Prose.

Note from the Author

I started writing *The Silent Blade* because I wanted to delve a little deeper into Aaron's character and his relationship with some of the others in *A Sellsword's Compassion* and the rest of the Seven Virtues series. I wanted to know more about the man who will one day find himself wrapped up in the conspiracies of princes and princesses, to better understand what it is that drives him. This was only partly successful and, as usual, it seems that with each answer I find, I also find a dozen more questions. But, hey, that's okay, isn't it? After all, Aaron's story isn't done; there is still time.

As always, I would like to thank those people who generously donated their time to beta read *The Silent blade* and for their suggestions and comments. These suggestions—as is usually the case—have proved invaluable and the story is better for it. As usual, a huge thanks to my family and to my wife who handles things in this world while I journey into others; without her, I suspect the lights would have been cut off a long time ago.

And to you lovers of things fantastic, you voracious devourers of stories and myths, I thank you the most. A work of fiction that has no reader is like a dream that has never been dreamed, as insubstantial as mist. So here, then, is my thanks to all of you dreamers out there, those within whose minds Aaron, May, and the rest have an opportunity to live and breathe, if only for a time. And until next time, keep dreaming—one night you'll close your eyes and there will be Aaron and his companions, waiting for you. Ready, once

again, to welcome you into their lives. And, hey. What could be cooler than that?