

The prisoner's face was badly bruised. His white curls were a bloody mess and a thickening trail of blood oozed down toward his eyes. He was shackled hand and foot in such a way that he was forced to stand on his toes. A filthy rag had been shoved into his mouth, and he choked on every breath. Still, he held his head up and glared at the two Gaolers through the iron grate door. Cadras sneered at him.

"All this trouble for an old man." Cadras turned his back on the cell and pulled out a pouch of tobacco. The prisoner had been escorted to his cell by six armed men.

"I heard he escaped from here a few years back. He's some kind of warlock or something." Stanton spit through the grate, but it fell short of the prisoner.

Stanton had been Cadras' partner since Cadras had been moved to the Gaolers. He was a few years older than Cadras, and he had been in the service of the Empire for his entire adulthood. He was a distant relative of some general, and in spite of being stuck for years with Gaoler's duty, he seemed to think he was on the fast track to an exalted military career. Cadras thought he was dull-witted.

Cadras rolled a clump of tobacco back and forth between his hands and mused disinterestedly, "A warlock..."

"Yep," Stanton continued. His face was broad, vaguely handsome, aging quickly, and totally bereft of insight. "He's a warlock and a thief. They say he can kill men with a word and then turn into a fog and float away. I guess he won't be getting away this time, though. Not chained up and gagged like that with a double watch on him."

"If he can turn into fog," Cadras asked, "why should chains and cloth stop him?"

"A sorcerer needs to speak to work his magic." Stanton nodded sagely. "They speak words of power in a foul tongue and bend all the beasts and the elements."

"An ancient tongue," Cadras corrected him.

The flickering lamps made it seem like Stanton's lips were in motion even as he stared blankly back at Cadras.

"They utter words of power in an ancient tongue and bend to their will all the beasts and

the elements," Cadras quoted. He knew that Stanton despised him without looking at the man's face. He continued his lecture with no small amount of satisfaction, "That was written by the poet and philosopher Antaxces, describing a mythical race of men. It is often bastardized by priests of Lord Quelestel, who do little reading of their own. No doubt you heard it at the basilica."

Cadras relished such blasphemies-- subtle repudiations of the the gods, and particularly of Quelestel, that often went unnoticed and could never be proven. He looked over to Stanton to enjoy the effect of his words, and found that Stanton was not outraged at Cadras' blasphemy, and was instead staring in admiration at the paper that Cadras was using to wrap his tobacco.

"Where'd you get that?" Stanton asked.

"I know a scribe," Cadras said, offering the cigarette to Stanton.

"Thanks," Stanton said, and then, "You know, paper is a really good idea. My cousin-- the one who's great uncle is Elder General Blackwell-- uses tobacco leaves, but usually they're either too damp to burn or too brittle to roll."

"He should should roll them when they're wet and then let them dry." Cadras rubbed his temples. He always felt a little stupider after talking to Stanton.

"There's nothing like tobacco to keep the lungs good and dry when it's damp." Stanton said, standing to light the cigarette from one of lamps ensconced on the walls. He inhaled deeply.

Cadras nodded and played with the cigarette that he had rolled for himself. He made it spin between his fingers and disappear and reappear in his other hand.

"I feel strange," Stanton said, and sat down hard on his chair. His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped forward. Cadras took the burning cigarette from Stanton's hand, snuffed it out carefully, and put it into his cloak. The prisoner looked at Cadras with newfound interest. Cadras let the prisoner wait, watching him. Then he took his time unlocking the cell. He dragged his stool into the cell and sat down near the prisoner.

"Halvered of Tyletos." Cadras took a small vial, filled with a dark liquid, from his cloak,

shielding it with his hands. In the light, the liquid would have been irradescant, but it was a bad idea to expose it to light. Cadras pulled the stopper out and a blue flame shot from the opening. He lit his cigarette and recorked the vial. "Reknowned thief and suspected sorcerer. Wanted by the Mouse for assorted thefts and murders, notably the assassination of the elder Lord Herfield and the theft of several artifacts from the library of the Church of Quelestel. Wanted by the Poor Man's Union..."

Here the prisoner's eyes narrowed. Cadras blew a stream of smoke into his face, and continued, "...wanted by the Poor Man's Union for the murder of two initiates, for refusing offers of membership while operating inside Union territory, and for general disrespect."

Cadras let him ponder this for a minute, then took out his knife and tested the edge on his finger. "Also wanted by Lighthall, the Tribunal, the First Assessor, and the governing lords of various provinces and sovereign nations." The knife lashed out at the prisoner's face. It caught the corner of the rag stuffed in his mouth, and pulled it out. Halvered gagged and spit a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

"Aren't you afraid I'll kill you with a word and turn into a fog?" The old thief sneered.

"I don't believe in magic."

Halvered stayed silent. Cadras stood before the man and stared blankly into his bruised face for a long time before saying, "I'm not here to kill you."

Halvered gave a hollow chuckle. "Alright, then. Get me out of these irons, boy."

Cadras pressed his knife lazily against Halvered's throat, and said, "A man in your position should be respectful."

"What do you want?" Halvered asked, annoyingly calm.

"I want help with a job." Cadras tickled Halvered's throat with the tip of his knife, then reached into his cloak and took out an ivory cylinder. It bore a worn relief of a man prostrating himself before a woman, flanked by two executioners. Above and below this scene were letters in an unfamiliar alphabet. Cadras twisted the cylinder and it came apart. Inside was a parchment scroll, which Cadras removed and unfurled.

"From what I've heard, you have underdeveloped senses of gratitude and loyalty, and your word is worth practically nothing. I've had a contract drawn up by the Brotherhood of Earth and Dust." Halvered's ironic smile faded a bit and Cadras made a noise that might have passed for a laugh. "Good, I see you've heard of them."

"I thought you didn't believe in magic," Halvered said.

"I believe that the Brotherhood of Earth and Dust is a group of dour old men with an inflated notion of justice and few excellent assassins." Cadras explained. The Poorman's Union was full of people who knew somebody who had known somebody who had met a mysterious and gruesome end after breaking a Brotherhood contract. Those stories alone made their service valuable. They had not been easy to find, for fear of the Church, and the contract had been expensive.

"Maybe I can get out of here with out your help," Halvered suggested. He seemed uneasy about signing the contract.

"Maybe," Cadras began to slowly reroll the parchment. "There are a dozen pious men building a scaffold out there. If you don't get out, you'll hang in the morning. I think that would be a waste of talent."

Halvered licked his teeth. "Read me the contract."

"Whereas the undersigned shall receive reprieve from execution; And whereas he who presents this contract has undertaken risks to life and liberty in order to provide said freedom; The Brotherhood of Earth and Dust determines that the terms to be set forth below are commensurate and just, and agrees that said terms shall be enforced by the Brotherhood, with the penalty of forfeit being death."

Halvered rolled his eyes. "Get to the point."

"In exchange for me freeing you, you will agree to help me break into the Library of the Church of Quelestel. If you try to harm me, or take anything from me against my will, you forfeit the contract. If you forfeit the contract, the Brotherhood will hunt you down and kill you."

Cadras saw the suspicion in the old thief's face. Cadras was not being completely

forthcoming, and Halvered knew it. Cadras waited. Halvered chewed his lip for a moment, and then grinned. "Well, that's not so bad. What are we after?"

"A book," Cadras answered. The scribe who Cadras knew was good for more than paper. He smuggled books out of the library, to circulate among their small, underground, group of philosophers. The books from the library were like nothing available for sale in the city. Their language was much richer, and more nuanced, to the point where reading them required frequent trips to the apothecary to consult his immense and ancient lexicon. According to the scribe, there was a room at the very center of the library that was a mystery to all the scribes, a room that not even the Candle could access. He claimed, however, that he had seen the Seer leaving the room with a book, and returning it later. Of all the riches in the Empire, Cadras felt certain that that book must be the most valuable. "We'll discuss the details after we've gotten out of here. There will be a patrol coming by any minute, and we don't want to have to fight our way out."

Cadras unlocked one of the shackles on Halvered's arms. The older man put a foot flat on the floor with a gasp of relief.

"Give me a quill, then," Halvered said.

Cadras shook his head and took out his dagger again.

"Ink's no good," he said, taking hold of Halvered's hand. The man's hand was gnarled with age, but the fingers were long and slender. With alarming quickness, Halvered broke free of Cadras and grabbed the wrist of his dagger hand. His grip was incredibly strong and Cadras made no attempt to break free. He looked at Halvered with disinterest.

Halvered looked at him intensely. "What do you want from me, boy?"

"You're the only person who has ever broken into the library. Like I said, I want a book."

This was not the whole truth, but if Halvered was still suspicious, he decided to resolve it later. He relaxed his grip on Cadras' wrist and held out his free hand. Cadras sliced the meaty part of the man's thumb and blood oozed out around the blade. Cadras held out the contract and Halvered smeared his thumb across it in two broad strokes. Cadras rolled the scroll up

and put it back into the case. He quickly unlocked the remaining shackles and Halvered fell, groaning, to the floor. Now, for the first time, he looked like a bloody and broken old man. He rose slowly, clutching his side.

"How did you get out of here last time?" Cadras asked, looking out into the corridor to see if anybody was coming.

"Two levels down, there's a duct that connects to the steam tunnels for the baths. If you stay low, you can avoid being scalded." Halvered massaged his wrists as he spoke.

Cadras had never been in the bowels of the prison, but he had heard rumors of dormant machines, untouched for centuries, designed to break men in horrible ways. He had heard that there were lower levels still, and he believed it, because there was always something older and deeper in Merendir.

"Alright. Don't get caught. I'm staying here," Cadras said, locking the cell behind them. He pulled his stool up beside Stanton and sat. "Meet me at sunrise tomorrow outside the Furred Standard on the Street of Fools." He pulled out the scroll case and handed it to Halvered. "Take the contract. Destroying it doesn't make it void, but it does violate the second clause."

Cadras took out the remainder of the cigarette he had given Stanton and grasped it in his lips. Cadras had grown so accustomed to Stanton's dull, uncomprehending stares, that he was surprised when Halvered seemed to understand his plan immediately and hurried off down the corridor. Halvered was going to be a pleasure to work with, Cadras thought. At least until he realized that Cadras must have had contract prepared before Halvered had been arrested. Cadras lit the end of the cigarette and inhaled deeply. What a strange feeling, he thought, and slumped forward, unconscious.