I sat uneasily on the rough bench in the cab. I had not been of good humor when I boarded the decrepit thing, and its steadily deteriorating suspension had done little to improve my mood. There was nothing for it now, I told myself. I could not go back, could not turn around. Even if the half-mad cabbie would consent to a change of course, there was no destination I could give him.

None at all.

I eyed my companions of fortune carefully, as I had done every hour since we left. They were a shifty bunch, I told myself, again and again. Suspicious. Two men and one woman, and each of them of dubious merit. The kind of lost souls that are attracted to this profession.

The first man was not unpleasant, but too well-armed to be innocent. He seemed to be almost cheerful when we boarded, and had made overtures at conversation for a while. Introduced himself as Francis. He had been met with resistance at every turn, however: the woman had done little more than nod or shake her head, and the other man had responded with a threat to cut out Francis’s tongue. For my part, I was in no mood for talk, and I informed Francis of such in so many words. From there, the trip had been in silence.

The man who was not Francis was taller. Dark complexion, with a number of bright scars marking his cheek and jaw. His scars reminded me of a wanted poster I had once seen. Little more explanation was necessary: he was a thug. Hired muscle, with a sharp blade and a distant conscience. A dark mirror of myself; and perhaps a portent of my future.

He sickened me.

The woman was an unknown. She watched everyone from under a wide-brimmed hat, and despite the road and her company, she dozed off a few times during the trip. Brave girl. It took everything in my power not to sit with my sword drawn and my hand on my knife. Besides which, if rumors were true...she had as much to fear outside the cab as within it.

A strong bump in the road shook me from my thoughts, and I took the opportunity to look out the window.

We had passed from the well-maintained highways and onto a twisting forest road. Twining trees and thick undergrowth lined the path, and in the distance I thought I could see stone structures. Cairns, or perhaps the ruins of buildings. In the darkness, I could not see them clearly.

Nor did I wish to. Upon laying eyes on the woods around us, I felt a chill run up my spine. My hand drew forth the first two inches of my blade, and would likely have pulled the whole of it to bear if I had not looked away that very moment. My heart beat a little faster in my chest, and I took a moment to calm myself.

Curious. I was not afraid of mere trees, and yet...something about this place made it more than simply another woodland. I could not pinpoint just what.

“It’s best not to look outside.”

I glanced to my left. The thug was leering at me, his face twisted into a sneer. He was the one who had spoken, his voice like gravel. “I’d hate for some fresh meat to spoil before it's even reached the table.”

I failed to keep my distaste from my face. “You dare.”

The man’s grin widened, and one of his eyebrows curled up towards his forehead. He chuckled dryly; it was an awful noise, grating to mind and spirit. “Listen to the pride on this one. He might be done for already. The weak don’t last long out here, Proudfoot. You should stay in the cab when we arrive, save us the stink of your piss when you hit the trails for the first time.”

*Enough!* I lunged towards him, my knife drawn, maneuvering in the tight confines of the cab. My left arm slammed into his chest, forcing him to the seat, my right drew back, my knife ready--

*Thunk*

I froze. There was a dagger before me, vibrating inches from my nose, end stuck in the cab wall. I looked to the other side of the cab, but neither Francis nor the woman was moving, or even armed. Francis was staring, open-mouthed. The woman was sleeping. Who had…

“Ahem.” I looked back, and saw that, in the process of leaning away from me, the thug had drawn a wheel-lock pistol and held it back at the level of his belt, pointing at my head. He noticed my attention, and smiled all the wider. “Try it, Proudfoot. Nothing’s ever been faster than my bullets before, but hey. Perhaps you’re the special someone.”

My own weapon was much too far to reach in time. A breath passed in tense silence, as the road bumped and rumbled beneath us. Finally, reluctantly, I returned to my seat, sheathing my knife. Rather than suffer their stares, I looked back outside the window, unsettling feelings be damned.

Behind me I heard the thug pull the dagger out of the side of the cab, and toss it back. “Nice throw.”

It flew towards the sleeping woman, but right before it struck, her hand intercepted it. In one smooth motion she caught it by the hilt, and returned it to a hidden empty sheathe inside her coat. The rest of her body didn’t move...except, at the edge my peripheral vision, I saw the hint of a grin cross her face. She said nothing.

The rest of the trip was in silence.

I almost wasn’t the first to know that we had arrived, despite the fact that I had stubbornly locked my eyes on the surrounding countryside. The hamlet was nearly indistinguishable from the rotted and ruined remains scattered throughout the forest, and the only sign that these fetid structures were inhabited came when I met the gaze of a peasant inside one.

I twisted around, getting a better view of what was ahead. The town was...humble. Ruined. Desolate. The colors of the buildings, once bright stone or strong wood, were now faded, leeched into the dead soil. Crumbling and patched, even the great church on the hill seemed a tenuous thing, ready to fall in a stiff breeze. The people shuffled about, heads down, movements jerking, eyes avoiding the moss-covered statue in the center of the square. In the distance, looming like a mountain over the whole area, I could make out the ruins of a mighty castle standing out on the end of the peninsula. The sight of it made my guts churn, and I looked away.

My heart sank. This place...it was worse than I had feared. Worse than I had hoped.

Worse, perhaps, than the fate I had escaped from. I recalled my thoughts when we had entered the woods, and the derisive advice of the thug sitting next to me. *Turn back*, I had thought. *Do not suffer this exile, this execution by slower means. Fight! Fight them all, if they should all come at once! Die as a man, as a hero, as a lord of the realm! Do not slink away into this silence!*

My heart railed against my judgement. *Stay here, and live a liar. Go home, and die honestly.* Which was more important? To live with integrity, or to live at all?

The carriage came to a stop, and my erstwhile companions disembarked. I remained behind, lost in thought, until I heard a gravelly voice. “Well, Proudfoot? You lost your nerve already?”

I think my eye might have twitched. This...*man* wouldn’t understand. There was no way I could explain it to him, either. *It takes more courage for me to leave this place and face the world beyond than to fight your petty horrors,* I would tell him. In my mind I could hear him laughing, a dry and empty cackle without any hint of mirth, as the carriage trailed away. I felt my face contort at the imagined insult. The little shit. I would show him the truth, so help me. No matter the cost.

A part of me said, *Proudfoot indeed*, but it was drowned out by the rest.

With a shifting of the ancient suspension, I stepped down out of the carriage, and onto the mud and cracked stone of the main street. I could feel the thug’s eyes on my back, but I refused to acknowledge him. My arms tensed, ready to answer any insult with steel, but the man simply turned and walked away. *Good choice, brute.*

The cab was unloaded in less than a minute. Only Francis and myself had brought any packages, and they were few enough in number. While that happened, I took the opportunity to look at where the cabbie had deposited us.

The building looked run down, but in decent shape compared to most of its neighbors. It was large, two stories tall and a sizable footprint. Dusky windows revealed flickering lights beyond, and the shadows of figures moving about within. A sign above the door declared the building was called The Guildhall. As the thug opened the door, I could hear the sounds of laughter and the bustle of activity inside. It looked a pleasant enough place, if a touch dirty. I hefted my bag and moved to follow.

The room inside proved to be a tavern of some kind. Cleaner than I expected, with a surprising quality of furnishings. The chairs and tables looked of recent and durable make, and the walls were scattered with paintings, statuary, and the stuffed heads of...gruesome creatures; purely fanciful stuff, likely the product of an over-creative taxidermist. Despite their fearsome aspects, it gave the space a feel less like a winesink and more like a hunting lodge.

Scattered throughout the room were six or seven of what could only be described as ‘adventurers’: mercenaries, cutthroats, vagabonds, and one or two outright criminals, all seated at tables as though they belonged. Murderers, who have chosen their targets well and their depredations have been declared legal. My brutish companion fit right in.

He stalked across the room to the fireplace at the far end, and a figure stood from one of the two armchairs facing it. The standing man wore a robe of delicate embroidery, with a crest of a noble house on his lapel. A gentleman? He called out a name, “Dismas!” and raised a hand in friendly greeting. The thug tossed a hefty pouch in reply, and the noble managed to catch it with some effort.

Hefting it, the man whistled. “Impressive haul, friend.”

Dismas replied, in his distinctive dry tone, “Not as much as it looks. One man paid in silver; I would have refused, but his price was too good.”

The two of them had attracted the attention of the rest of the room, and I quietly rested my hand on my knife. If that pouch was full of gold, there was no telling what this crowd would do. The noble seemed not to notice, and began working the strings. “Still not bad. How much are we looking at?”

Dismas shrugged. “Count it yourself. I’m going to go catch some sleep. Wake me for dinner.” He momentarily disappeared out a doorway at the far end of the room, but then poked his head back into the room. “Also, we’ve got company.”

The noble looked up from the bag to the door, setting eyes upon us; Francis and the woman had shuffled in behind me while I waited. The man raised his free hand in greeting, “Hello there! Take a seat, I’ll see to you in a moment. Paracelsus! Can you get me some paper?”

A woman sitting with her feet on the table startled at his address, then reached into a pouch at her side and withdrew a sheet of rough paper in her hand and a pen clasped between forefinger and thumb. As the three of us found a nearby table and took a seat, the noble plucked the offered collection from her grasp and made his way to us through the room. As he sat, he set out an inkwell from his pocket and said, “Sorry about the poor welcome. I’d offer you food but the cook’s out at the mill right now. Tea?”

The noble had dumped the bag of gold unceremoniously on the table beside him, as though forgotten. Stranger still, the rest of the room seemed to have forgotten it as well.

Francis included. He nodded enthusiastically, adding, “Oh! Yes, please, I’d love some.”

I nodded my assent as well, and the woman shrugged. The noble signaled to the woman--Paracelsus, I think her name was--and she rolled her eyes, pulled her feet off her table, and disappeared out a door nearby the bar. The noble took no notice of the woman’s insubordination, and instead rolled out the paper she had provided and flattened out the corners. “So, now then. Introductions, I suppose. My name is Lord Duran Nightingale, and this land is mine.”

He spread his arms as though to embrace the squalor all about him, and as I gazed upon him I found myself struck dumb. This vital, hearty man is not the one I had expected to be responsible for the destitution of this place. I felt revulsion quickly overtake my gentlemanly respect, and I said in uncourteous tones, “You have let it fall to ruin, then, Lord Nightingale. This place is wretched beyond my darkest imaginings.”

His response was to smile, and to gesture at me with the pen. “Correct; if not in truth at least in spirit. That’s why you’re here.”

“If not in truth? What lie have I spoken?”

Lord Nightingale gestured vaguely. “I’ve only been here a scant few months. The ruin you see is from my ancestor. Great Uncle, in fact. It was given to me in the wake of his death.”

I was not satisfied, but I found myself unable to articulate it. “I see.”

Seeing me mollified, he continued, “In any case, you now have me at disadvantage, sir. What, might I ask, should I call you?”

I had been preparing for this moment, and I lied without hesitation, “Barristan.”

The pen danced across the paper. “Barristan...very well, Barristan, what skill have you in the art of combat? You look hale and fit, and not a day over thirty. Were you a soldier?”

He had not questioned my answer, nor had he even asked for a family name. This was going to be easier than I thought. I nodded in response to his query, letting pride touch my voice, “A Captain in His Majesty's Royal Marines, after seven years of service. I was abroad for most of those years, and saw the field of battle more times than I can count. And rest assured,” I added, with a small grin, “I can count rather high.”

Lord Nightingale answered my jest with a small chuckle, and began to take a few notes on the paper. “So I see. Well, we will make good use of your skills here, Captain. The battles are not those you are accustomed to, but a man who can face down foreign guns without hesitation has seen more darkness than most who come here. I have faith that it will be enough.”

Something about the way he phrased his reply left me uneasy, but I did not press. Instead, Lord Nightingale turned to Francis, and asked, “Now then, how shall I address you, sir? Or should I say Brother; you have the look of a holy man about you.”

I looked surprised. Francis did not have the look of a priest at all; surely his lordship was mistaken. Francis himself looked rather shocked at the implication, and said, “How did you know?”

I swiveled my head between them, uncomprehending. For his part, Lord Nightingale only smiled in response. “An educated guess. Are you another of the Order?”

Francis was surprised again, and I could contain myself no longer. “You’re a *priest?*”

He turned to me, looking sheepish. “Not exactly, sir Barristan.”

Lord Nightingale spoke up from his writing, “He is a crusader, Captain. Brother, what is your name?”

“Francis.”

There was no further answer to my question. Nightingale paused his scribbling long enough to glance in the ‘crusader’s’ direction, and asked, “Did you want to speak with Master Reynauld? He is here, in the church.”

Francis perked up at that. “Oh, yes! As soon as possible, please!”

Nightingale nodded at that. “Of course, we’re almost finished here.” At this he turned to the last member of our trio, saying only, “My lady?”

“Audrey.”

He jotted it down, and glanced up again. “And what is it that you do, my lady?”

She shook her head. “Not a lady.”

He raised an eyebrow, and she rolled her eyes. “I go’ all the parts, you twat. Jus’ not a lady all proper-like.”

“Very well. But what is it that you *do?*”

She flashed a grin, but it quickly faded, and after it was long gone she reiterated, “Not a lady.”

Lord Nightingale let that sit for a while, without visible response. Then the rude servant woman from earlier deposited a tea service on the table, and the quiet was broken. Nightingale looked up and smiled, saying “Thank you, Para,” before pouring a cup for each of us, and then himself.

The tea was fine.

After a brief silence as each of us absorbed our tea and biscuits, Nightingale reached into his pocket, and retrieved a thick pipe. “You don’t mind if I smoke?”

We gave our permissions, and he stuffed the end with tobacco and struck a match, then casually lit the pipe and released a billow of smoke. It floated up to join the cloud from the oil lamps already pressing against the ceiling. That done, he gave a contented sigh and said, apparently to the wall, “Times like these you can almost forget.”

It was almost too quiet for me to make out. “What was that?”

He ignored me. Instead, he had sat up, and locked eyes on Audrey, his pen back in his fingers. “Do you have any formal training?”

She frowned, looking confused. “Doin’ what?”

Lord Nightingale made a dismissive gesture. “Fighting. Killing. Were you trained?”

She looked a little offended. “What? No!”

“Have you ever done it before?”

“Wha’, killed people?” She looked wary, now. “Maybe I ‘ave.”

Nightingale frowned slightly. “I’m not here to collect a reward. I want to know if you wish to stay in town, or if I can rely on you to do work.”

“What kind?”

He gestured again, this time at the fake heads lining the walls. “The kind of work that needs a killer’s hand.”

Audrey looked up at the trophies with some skepticism. But when she turned back to Nightingale, she simply shrugged again. “Shur’. I can at that. ‘s why we’re all here, innit?”

Nightingale replied only by scribbling a few more lines onto his parchment. He then blew on it a few times to dry the ink, then replaced the pen into the inkwell and sat back like a man just finished with a hearty meal. “Right. Well, then, let’s see if we can find rooms for you two. Francis, the church is just a short way up the hill, on the road through the center of town. I’m sure Reynauld will be happy to quarter you there.”

Francis nodded his appreciation, replacing his cup and saucer. “Thank you, m’lord, I’ll want to swear in to him right away.”

“Will you need help with your baggage?”

Francis shook his head, and we all rose to our feet as he turned and left.

As I watched the precocious priest depart, I could not help but comment to Lord Nightingale, “I still cannot see in him a holy man. He is far too young.”

Nightingale might have smirked a little, or perhaps it was a true smile; it was difficult to gauge his warmth from the corner of my eye. “Crusaders walk that line fairly close. You could call him a simple soldier, if you wished. Surely you have seen young men in the service.”

I frowned. “I suppose. It seems cruel to thrust a raw recruit into a place such as this.”

Nightingale frowned as well, his gaze still on the empty door that Francis had left through. “All men who come here are raw. The true tests come after you arrive, not before.”

I shifted my gaze directly onto the fledgling lord, frown still in place but now touched with irritation. “You call me inexperienced? I assure you—”

Audrey cut in, “You lot all talk like gits. We gonna find rooms or what?”

Nightingale seemed to startle at that, and turned about as though I had said nothing. “Of course. Come, this way.”

As we left, the few other adventurers spread about the common room watched us go without comment. I thought I could hear the sounds of suppressed conversation start up behind us as the door closed in our wake, but I could not be sure.

The bag of gold remained on the table, unmolested.

Nightingale found two doors marked with papers covered in his own unmistakable handwriting; I was disappointed to discover that the unintelligibility of the lord’s script was not previously the result of my attempts to read his writing upside down, but rather its natural state. He casually tore the mysterious paper from its peg and pulled a key from its resting place in the door’s lock. “This one is for you.”

I took the offered key and he turned away, attempting to find a place for Audrey. I myself turned to the room that was apparently mine, and opened the door.

I thought for a moment that it was already occupied. The bed was in disorder, there was a cloak hanging from a peg on the wall, and small pile of unwashed clothing lay in a heap near the dresser. I could not help but turn up my nose at the disorder. “What is all this?”

Nightingale turned back, and stuck his head in the room. He immediately recoiled, with an ungentlemanly swear. “I told them to clean this place out! Damn it all. Well, anything you find in there is yours, everyone else has apparently abandoned all claim on any of it.”

I stood nearly agape. “Who’s possessions are these?”

He stopped a moment and pulled out the paper he had removed from the door. “His name was…Fossard. He died about two weeks ago. A shame. I didn’t much like him, but he was a decent hand, or so I’m told. Reliable. Anyway, I never got his name, or any relations beyond the hamlet. His equipment went to the forge, but it seems nobody tended to the rest of his things.”

I could only stare at him, in utter shock. Somehow he decided this meant that the conversation was concluded, and he turned to a different door with a similar paper. This one went to Audrey.

She asked no questions, took the key, and disappeared into her room.

In returning, Nightingale met my expression with a steady curiosity. “Is something wrong?”

I could not find the words to express it. Simply saying *this place is a pit* seemed insufficient. He had suggested that I—*I*, who was once awarded by the King *himself*—were to rest my head in the leftover refuse of a dead man, to pick through his belongings like some kind of reprobate searching for scraps. It was intolerable. Utterly mad. And this…pitiful *lordling* dared to stare at me as though I were somehow overreacting. As though it were entirely a proper matter of course that men should dig through the corpses of those who came before in order to furnish themselves.

Before I could muster my thoughts into words, Nightingale’s expression shifted to one of irritation and resignation. “I see. You had somewhat loftier expectations.”

I sputtered, “Somewhat! This is a…a…!”

He finished my sentence, “...—necessity. Unless you’d prefer a crumbling hovel or the bare street.” His expression turned cold. “This is no country estate, and despite your experience thus far you—none of us!—are here to *take tea*. We live on the edges of our resources, all of us. I don’t know your reasons for being here, but most come for promises of gold, and gems, and the treasures of my lineage; did you believe such things could be taken without trials?”

I scowled at him, but did not answer.

He blew off my response with a gesture, and relaxed into a look of resignation. “It matters not. If you’re unsatisfied with the accommodations, I’m sure Dismas can arrange for your return aboard the next carriage out of town. The old road is dangerous, but not so much of late. You may even reach civilization alive.”

With that he brushed past me and down the hall, returning to the common area. Before he was out of sight, though, I glanced back into ‘my’ room and a question came unbidden to my mind. “Lord Nightingale?”

He stopped and turned back, his mood unreadable. “Yes?”

“Fossard. You gave me his name, and then in the same breath you said you didn’t know it.”

Then he scoffed, and answered offhandedly, “Oh, is that all? Let me ask you, then, if I were to go and search for a Captain Barristan in the records of His Majesty’s Royal Marines, would I find him? Would he really be a man retired in his late twenties, veteran of countless continental campaigns? Could I even find a man who could describe his face?”

I stood like a stone. My left hand was already resting on my sword, as it always did, though now my knuckles were growing pale from my grip on the hilt.

Nightingale, it seemed, either didn’t notice the tension, or didn’t care. He continued, in a quiet voice that only just reached me, “If I were to try to pass on your old cloak, or your dirty clothing, could I find anyone with what information you have given me?”

The silence gathered.

With a brief smile and a nod, he said, “I thought not.” And with that, he was gone.