

The Merchant of Truridge

by

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The carriage bounced as one of the wheels hit a bump. Victoria gasped and a shudder ran through her. Sirion grinned and kissed her.

The carriage continued. Victoria bit her lip and stared into Sirion's eyes. He couldn't help himself. Sirion had often tried to put into words his feelings for Victoria, not once had the words seemed adequate.

"Stop, Sirion," Victoria said between heavy breaths.

"You're sure about that?" he asked with another grin. "You don't seem so sure."

"We're almost there," she said. Sirion didn't stop.

"So? The carriage can wait in the courtyard for a while. No one will notice."

"No," Victoria said, removing Sirion's hand from between her legs then smoothing down her dress.

"There will be plenty of time later, my love," she said and kissed Sirion just as the carriage came to a stop.

There was a longing in her eyes that set Sirion's blood on fire. He would have locked the carriage door there and then and taken her if only she'd let him. But she wouldn't. Victoria was too thoughtful. They were expected and it wouldn't do to be late, or even worse, not turn up at all. Sirion had often noted that Victoria's organisation perfectly offset his impulsiveness. It was just one of the things he loved about her.

The carriage door opened and the driver stood aside to let the occupants out. Sirion leapt from the carriage to the gravel courtyard and held his hand for Victoria to step down.

"Full of vigour tonight aren't you," she said stepping down and wincing as her feet touched the ground. Gravel was never comfortable when wearing slippers.

Sirion noticed the pained expression and scooped Victoria up into his arms and carried her to the entrance to the manor. The greeter at the entrance smiled as he watched, no doubt amused by Sirion's antics. As Sirion lowered Victoria's feet back on the floor, now they were past the gravel, the greeter bowed low.

"If you would like to follow me, merchants." With that the man turned and led the grinning Sirion and the embarrassed Victoria towards the great hall of the manor.

Upon arriving the greeter opened the doors to the great hall, had a quick word with the announcer and, with another low bow, disappeared to greet any new comers.

The announcer coughed and raised his voice.

"Presenting merchants Sirion and Victoria Tell."

Victoria's parents were already on their way to the couple before their names had been announced. Neither Sirion nor Victoria had seen her parents since the two had married almost six months earlier. In truth Sirion had not wanted to return to Truridge at all but events seemed to have conspired to bring them back.

"It's so good to see you both," Victoria's mother, Janice Flint, said and then kissed her daughter on each cheek before giving the same traditional greeting to Sirion.

Janice Flint was a round woman with long brown hair that framed her plump face. Not for the first time Sirion noted that his mother in law looked more like a matron or a nanny than the wife of one of the richest merchants in Truridge.

James Flint, however, looked just as Sirion thought he should look. He was tall with a long face, balding black hair and flinty blue eyes. He looked to Sirion like an eagle always hungry for its next meal.

In the days of old, before the title had been abandoned, James Flint would have been known as a merchant lord. He was the type of man who always got what he wanted, whether he had to buy it, trade for it or coerce it from someone. As a consequence he had as many enemies among the merchants of Truridge as he did friends.

Sirion's father had been a shorter, less bald version of James Flint. It was for that reason that Victoria's father had agreed to the marriage between her and Sirion. A pairing between two of the richest merchant houses could only serve to consolidate both their influences within Truridge.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father," James Flint said without so much as a hint of emotion as he grasped his son in law's hand with a firm grip and shook firm. "He was a great man."

"And a great father," Sirion added. "I hope one day to be half the man he was." It was the respectful thing to say.

"And half the merchant no doubt," James Flint added.

Sirion almost thought the man seemed to be sizing him up as if he were competition. In a way, he had to admit, they were now.

"Of course," Sirion said.

"Though his death has cut our honeymoon a little short," Victoria added, smiling.

Short was an understatement. Sirion and Victoria had been in SARTH, they had intended to stay there, to set up their own merchant business as far away from Truridge as possible. It wasn't that Truridge was a bad place but both Sirion and Victoria felt like it was their parents place. In Truridge they would never escape from their parents' larger than life shadows.

The death of Sirion's father had forced them to come back home, even if only as a temporary arrangement. Sirion's mother had died in labour and his father had never remarried, never produced another heir. Sirion and Victoria now owned the entire Tell fortune which included a thriving business that needed running. Even if they did decide to still move to SARTH it would take a long time to sell off the business and other assets Sirion's father had collected over the years. It could well take years before they were ready to leave Truridge.

"Some things are more important than taking a holiday," James Flint said. "You have responsibilities now."

"We understand that, father..." Victoria started.

"I don't see any signs of a child on the way yet," her father said, cutting her off. "It's been six months already."

"James, leave them be," Victoria's mother said and then winked at her daughter. "I'm sure it's not for lack of trying."

"How are you finding your father's business, Sirion?" she continued.

"Complicated," Sirion admitted. "He had his hands in a lot of pots, as they say. There's a lot of books and records to go through to find where all of my family's assets lie."

James Flint frowned. "If you need help going through them I'll look through them myself."

Sirion knew full well that Victoria's father would love nothing more than to take over the Tell business in Truridge. In truth Sirion found the idea tempting.

"Thank you for the offer, James," Sirion said. Both men knew it was the diplomatic way of saying 'no'.

"Mhm," James Flint grunted. "There are some people you should meet, Sirion. Acquaintances of your father. I'll introduce you to them before we start the banquet. Give your wife and her mother some time to catch up."

With that James Flint turned and walked away, not even looking back to check whether Sirion was following.

Sirion kissed his wife, bowed his head to her mother and then hurried after her father.

What followed for Sirion was an enlightening half hour. He had spent days since arriving back in Truridge pouring over his father's books. The books contained detailed notes on every deal, trade and transaction made by his merchant business. Sirion had noticed discrepancies in the records. His father appeared to be procuring certain rare, valuable goods at a fraction of their worth.

Fire stones from the Dragon Empire were said to be crystallised Dragon tears, they glowed with an inner fire that disappeared with even the slightest crack or chip. They were the rarest gem stones in Acanthia, maybe even in the known world. Sirion himself had bought a golden ring with a fiery red stone set in it for Victoria when their marriage had been agreed; it had cost him a small fortune. Sirion's father had bought a small chest of fire stones for the same price.

Drurr cured leather armour was near as tough as steel plate but retained the flexibility of leather. It was also near impossible to deal in because the Drurr refused to trade with humans and guarded their secrets with their lives. Sirion's father had sold fifty sets of the rare armour to the King of Acanthia. The armour was almost a gift at the discounted price it had been sold at but still he had made twice as much as he had paid for the armour.

Now, after meeting some of his father's associates Sirion was starting to understand. One man bowed low to Sirion and said.

"I had a most profitable business arrangement with your father, merchant Tell. You have now inherited that agreement and the responsibilities that come with it."

Sirion had smiled and shaken the man's hand in friendship despite his introduction sounding almost like a threat. He tried to hide the fact that he recognised the man's name.

He had been introduced as Lord Drake Morrass but Sirion knew he was no Lord. Drake Morrass was a pirate. Sirion had heard about the young pirate whilst in Sarth. He had a sizeable bounty on his head.

Another man Sirion was introduced to was the city's harbour master; a short, bald man with a pudgy face and dark, greedy eyes. Sirion couldn't help but take an immediate dislike to the man.

All the pieces started to fit together for Sirion. The pirate would sell the rarest of his stolen goods to Sirion's father who would be able to find a better price for them than the pirate could find with his limited contacts. The harbour master would make sure the cargo was listed as something else to reduce the tax both parties would have to pay. No doubt the harbour master earned a fair wage for his services.

Sirion realised then that his father wasn't the food merchant he had always believed him to be but was instead at the centre of a criminal import, export business. It was exactly the type of business that the authorities of Truridge were trying to put a stop to, and both Sirion's and Victoria's father had long been the most outspoken supporters of the crackdown.

James Flint was studying Sirion. Whilst not admitting to anything the man had just indicated he was also involved in the criminal enterprise. No doubt he was now deciding whether he could trust his son in law. Sirion was scared of what the man might do if he decided Sirion was not to be trusted.

"I never knew my father was involved..." Sirion started but was stopped by a warning glare from his father in law.

"We'll discuss this in more detail later, Sirion," said James Flint, his tone stern and uncompromising. "The banquet is almost ready."

Sirion didn't doubt that he would receive a visit from merchant Flint and the pirate Drake Morrass. No doubt they would want to lay pressure on Sirion in a more private setting.

Again Sirion considered selling his family's business to merchant Flint. He wondered whether his father, watching them from death's isle, would be disappointed if he saw Sirion selling the

business he'd created to James Flint. Sirion wasn't even sure he still cared how his father's ghost would feel.

The banquet passed quickly for Sirion. He was distracted by his thoughts, barely touching the food laid in front of him. Victoria could tell something was wrong, she had always been very attuned to his feelings, even when they had been children playing together whilst their father's met and discussed business.

She laid a hand on Sirion's arm, a small way of offering comfort. Sirion wanted nothing more than to discuss the matter with her, to gain her perspective on the situation. He promised her they would talk soon and tried to focus on the food in front of him.

After the meal all the guests returned to the great hall. There, bards had set themselves up and music began to fill the hall creating a cacophony of interacting musical notes underpinned by the quiet drone of constant chatter from hundreds of mouths.

Guests formed themselves into allied groups of merchants and talked amongst themselves whilst sending paranoid stares at other groups. James Flint stood looking over all the groups of gathered merchants like some sort of merchant king. Sirion found himself standing by his father in law's side. It seemed to him his allegiance had been pre-determined.

This is how it will always be. Sirion thought. *I will always be in his shadow, just as I was always in my father's shadow.* The thought terrified him more than he could understand.

A messenger arrived and ran straight to James Flint. The merchant frowned as he listened and then dismissed the messenger before turning to Sirion.

"There's a fire down at the docks. It appears one of your warehouses is on fire. They have it under control so it won't spread but they believe it to be arson."

Sirion sighed, one more worry to the list. "I should go down there. Oversee the matter."

James Flint nodded his agreement. "Victoria can stay here for the night."

Sirion smiled. "Our estate is on the way. I can have her dropped off before heading to the docks." The last thing Sirion wanted was to arrive home and not have Victoria there to greet him.

"Very well," James Flint agreed. "We shall arrange a private meeting soon Sirion."

"As you wish." Sirion shook his father in law's hand and left to find Victoria.

"We're leaving," Sirion said to Victoria once they were back in the carriage and well under way. "Truridge, we're leaving for good."

"I know," Victoria said with a smile. "I was just waiting for you to decide."

Sirion looked into his wife's dark brown eyes, her soft features, her perfect pale skin. At times it was as if she knew him better than he knew himself and that just made him want her even more.

"I'll sell the business to your father as soon as possible. I don't even care if he gives us a poor price, as long as it's enough to start again somewhere else, somewhere..."

"Away from Truridge."

"Exactly."

The carriage pulled to a stop and Sirion heard the driver dismount. Then he heard footsteps hurrying away from the carriage.

Sirion poked his head out of the window. They weren't at his family estate, he had no idea where they were but it was dark and deserted and by the smell they were near the river that led to the sea. The river was often used as a dumping ground for waste this close to its mouth; it made the smell... unpleasant.

Sirion swivelled his head round to look at the driver's position. The man was long gone but where had he left them and why. Without warning Sirion felt strong hands grab him underneath his shoulders and he was pulled from the carriage window and dumped in a heap on the floor.

He struggled back to his feet. "Look, I don't know who you are but we don't have any mon..."

He never saw the blow coming. A meaty fist slammed into the left side of his head interrupting him mid-sentence. Sirion slumped backwards into strong arms that held him tight. He

felt blood fill his mouth and spat it onto the floor. There was something white and hard in the blood, it took a moment for Sirion to realise it was one of his teeth.

He was being held by two men. Struggling would be pointless, they were both bigger and stronger than him and they had an arm each. Sirion looked up to see two more men dragging Victoria out of the carriage. One of the men, who had a ragged scar leading from the fulcrum of his nose to the top of his lip, had a hand clamped over Victoria's mouth. She looked unharmed. The men dragged Victoria so she was facing Sirion. There was terror in her eyes.

A fifth man stepped in between Sirion and Victoria. He too was a big man, he had long greasy hair and cruel, sharp features, and he walked with a confidence that revealed him as being in charge of the others. Though his ears were still ringing from the punch and he felt like throwing up Sirion recognised the emblem on the pommel of the sword that hung on the man's belt. He was a sergeant in the city guard.

"I suggest you don't scream," the sergeant said to Victoria, he waited for her to nod and then signalled to the man with the scar who removed his hand from her mouth. She kept silent.

"Good," said the sergeant, grinning. "First rule, any noise from either one of you and the other one pays the price."

"What do you want?" Sirion blurted out.

The sergeant spun around and struck Victoria on the side of her face with the back of his hand. Victoria slumped against her captives and let out a sob. The sergeant turned and sent a fist into Sirion's ribs. Sirion doubled over in pain, his arms still held by the men behind him.

"Are we both clear on the first rule?" the sergeant asked.

Sirion looked at the man, defiance blazed in his eyes but he nodded. Victoria didn't even look up but he saw her nod.

"Good," the sergeant said and signalled to another of his men standing nearby. "Belding, do it."

Belding walked towards Victoria, Sirion could see an evil smile on his face as the pudgy man stepped behind Victoria and reached down unbuckling his belt and fumbling with his fly. Victoria's eyes were wider than Sirion could have believed and he saw true terror in their depths. She stared at her husband through those fear filled eyes and gasped as Belding spread her legs. A moment later another fist connected with Sirion's gut, again he doubled over.

Sirion saw determination in his wife's face then and he knew she was determined not to cry out again, to spare Sirion the blow. It disappeared as soon as the ugly man behind thrust himself inside of her.

Victoria cried out. A sound full of pain, disgust and fear. This time the blow hit the right side of Sirion's face. He felt the smack and for a moment his vision went black. Then he could see the ground; feel hot blood dripping from his face to the floor.

Sirion raised his eyes. He could see his wife's face, see her face so full of pain and see how her jaw clenched to stop herself from crying out again, see the man behind her grunting as he thrust himself inside her again and again.

Sirion lowered his eyes and looked away. He could feel hot tears streaming down his face. The sergeant grabbed a hand full of Sirion's hair and twisted his head to make him look into his wife's face.

"New rule," the sergeant said. "No looking away." Then his hand lashed out and struck Victoria in the face, splitting her lip. She didn't cry out.

Belding grunted as he spent himself inside of Victoria. Sirion saw the disgust on his wife's face. He saw her shaking violently and despaired as he could do nothing.

"How was she Belding?" the sergeant asked with a wicked grin.

"Wonderful, sarg," Belding said in a deep voice. "Just like a tight lipped virgin. So accommodating." Then he slapped Victoria hard on the back. Victoria coughed at the impact and the sergeant hit Sirion in the ribs again.

“Get over here, Belding,” the sergeant said. “It’s my turn.

Again Victoria’s eyes went wide with terror and Sirion saw something else there, something new. He saw despair.

Sirion almost got free once. When one of the men holding him switched with another to take a turn on his wife. Sirion had struggled but all it earned was another blow to his wife’s face. It broke her nose and blood poured out, gushing down her beautiful face onto the ground below. She didn’t cry out. Sirion looked into Victoria’s face, into her eyes and it was as if she was no longer there.

Only once all six men had had their turn did they let go of Victoria. She dropped to the floor, motionless. Her eyes open but vacant, it was as if she were dead but Sirion could see her still breathing, the gentle rise and fall of her chest. He wanted to go to her, to comfort her, to take it all back, to rage and kill all the men who had done that to her.

The sergeant bent down and looked into Victoria’s face.

“I think we broke her, boys,” he said and kicked her in the head with a steel capped boot.

Sirion couldn’t take it anymore. He screamed at the men. Struggled against their grips on him. He tried to break free and seek righteous vengeance.

The sergeant silenced Sirion with a swift kick to the stomach.

“Toss the body in the river,” the sergeant said.

“NO!” Sirion shouted earning him another blow to the face. He opened his eyes just in time to see his wife’s body, as lifeless as a corpse, hit the water.

Great racking sobs shook Sirion and he registered another three heavy blows to his face before a big hand closed around his neck and lifted his head. The sergeant faced him, grinning from ear to ear.

“Why?” Sirion managed, his voice sounded weak to his ears.

“A message to your father,” the sergeant said. “Make sure to tell him when you see him.”

Then a fist hit Sirion full in the face. He felt his nose shatter under the impact, felt blood everywhere and then felt no more.

Sirion opened an eye. The world looked blurred, as if he were looking at it through cloudy glass. Everything was cold and an odd shade of green. He inhaled and water flooded into his lungs.

He coughed, trying in desperation to force the cold water from his lungs but he was still underwater. *Underwater!* He began struggling; trying to pull himself in the direction he thought was the surface.

He broke the surface of the water and managed to cough up some water before dipping below again. It seemed to him to take an age before he could breathe again.

Frantic, Sirion looked around, searching for land. He could still only open one eye, his left eye felt swollen. Dull pain ached throughout his entire body numbed only a little by the cold of the water. He spotted the bank of the river and began to struggle towards it, each foot he gained causing searing pain in his ribs.

He didn’t want to live. The memories of the night, of what had happened begged him to give up, to sink below the surface and stay there. Sirion wanted to comply, he wanted to die, to be with Victoria again on death’s isle but his body wouldn’t let him. It struggled towards the bank, defying its owner’s wishes.

He reached the bank and grabbed hold of it, resting, if only for a moment. The lip was a good foot above the water level and Sirion lacked the energy to pull himself up. He felt sick from the dirty water he’d swallowed and again contemplated letting go of the bank and just sinking into the dark depths.

Hands grabbed hold of his arm and pulled. Sirion pushed with all his remaining strength and then was up and over and lying on the bank, on solid ground. He lay there, sucking down air despite the protest of his injured ribs. He stared up at the night sky for a long time, lost in the intermittent twinkle of stars and the constant pain.

“Thought ya was a gonna there,” said an accented voice from somewhere close by. “Ya was down fer a time.”

Sirion turned his head to find the owner of the voice. Blood and water pooled underneath his face. The man was short and slim with dark hair masking much of his face, dark eyes shone with intelligence but his clothes identified him as a street rat; a beggar and thief. He sat cross legged and drank deep from a small ceramic jug attached to his wrist by a short length of rope.

“You were watching?” Sirion asked, his voice weak and strained. Each word made the throbbing mass of pain he had once called a nose blaze a new.

“I saw it,” the man said. “Could'ner done nowt 'bout it. One man such as m'self against them six.”

“Victoria... did... she...” Sirion started but stopped at the man shaking his head.

“Lass ya wer with ner surfaced.”

“I see,” Sirion though he should cry but he felt as though he had run out of tears. Victoria was gone, dead. What was the point anymore?

Silence stretched out for a long time before the man beside Sirion spoke again.

“M'name's Thom. An it's a real pleasure t' meet ya Sirion Tell.”

It took a moment to register with Sirion that his saviour already knew his name. “Who are you?” Sirion asked the man.

“Jus' tol' ya. Name's Thom.”

Sirion recognised the accent now. Thom was from Arkond, the capital city of Acanthia, far from the coast, far from Truridge. Street rats rarely left the place they were born, they couldn't afford to. Whoever Thom was he was no street rat.

Thom grinned, though only half his mouth was visible under his hair. He took a long swig from the jug attached to his wrist and then placed the cork back in the neck, a contented sigh escaping his lips.

“M'from the thieves' guild. Capital branch as ya'v na doubt guessed. Seems t' local boys 'ave been 'avin' some problems with a pirate.”

Sirion kept quiet, letting the thief talk, as much because it hurt to talk as because he wanted to hear what Thom said.

“Reckon ya met 'im earlier. One Drake Morrass. Seems 'ee's been cuttin' the local guild outta 'is dealings. Guild don't look kindly on such.”

“What... does this have to do with me?” Sirion managed to ask. He had started to shiver. It was a bad sign; it meant he was going to live.

“Only reason Drake can cut our boys out is by 'avin' the city guard in 'is pocket.”

“Drake is the one who ordered this?” Sirion asked, he detected an edge of fury creeping into his voice.

“Ee's the one 'oo 'ad ya da killed an' all.”

Sirion had been told his father had died of natural causes. “Why?”

“I dunno. Thought you might.”

Sirion pushed himself up onto an elbow. Fresh pain blossomed everywhere.

“Ya know... I can 'elp,” Thom said.

“Then give me a hand.”

Thom laughed as he stood and helped lift Sirion to his feet. The little man was stronger than he looked.

“Meant I can 'elp ya get ya revenge.”

Sirion looked at the thief. He was serious; there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. He thought about the offer for a long time. Thom stood patiently awaiting an answer.

“I want to kill them myself,” Sirion said, the fury and the hatred in his voice surprising even to himself. “All of them. Everyone involved, including Drake and I don't want them to see it coming. I want to see the shock on their faces when they realise I'm alive and that it's my hands

taking their miserable lives.”

“We can do that,” Thom promised. “Me an' mine can teach ya t' find 'em. T' 'unt 'em. T' kill 'em. Fer a price o'course. But I reckon ya can afford it.”

“Whatever it costs,” Sirion said, his voice as cold as ice. “I don't care.”

“First best get ya patched up. River ain't the cleanest place t' take a swim.”

Sirion watched the house he'd grown up in, that he'd lived in for twenty years, the house that, until two weeks ago, had been his and Victoria's home. Now it looked to Sirion like a giant grey tomb.

It had been only two weeks since his disappearance, another four weeks and James Flint would move in as the nearest living relative. Victoria's father would gain the entire Tell fortune for the price of daughter.

Sirion no longer cared what happened to his business, nor the majority of his fortune. All he cared about was his vengeance, but he needed money to pay his new '*allies*'. He knew there was a chance they would kill him after he helped them break into his house, in truth he almost hoped they would.

The house was more like small fortress in truth. A great, grey stone monolith three stories high capable of holding hundreds of people. It was easy to get lost in the maze of rooms. As a child Sirion had often hidden from his father when he was in trouble. His father had once sent the entire house staff, thirty people in all, looking for him. It had taken them four hours to find him. His father had been more relieved than angry once Sirion had been found.

The walls around the Tell estate were thirty feet tall and guarded day and night, merchants in Truridge were a cautious lot. The walls didn't bother Sirion though; he knew a way underneath them, a short underground passage designed as an escape route that led through the family tomb. That was how they would break in now. Sirion could, of course, just walk in through the front gate but his '*allies*' had stressed the importance of him remaining dead. If his survival was common knowledge Drake's men would be forced to finish the job.

“It's time,” said the man assigned to watching the guards movements. He was a man with a heavily scarred face known as Lundle.

Sirion led the way, moving in staggered steps as his ribs sent twinges of pain throughout his chest. The thieves had done their best to patch Sirion up, treating both injuries and illness, they even managed to make his nose look like a nose again... somewhat. Even the best of healers would admit though there was only so much you could do with broken ribs, most of the time successful healing boiled down to luck and rest.

Four thieves followed Sirion, flowing from shadow to shadow, somehow able to melt and disappear into the darkness. It was a skill they promised to teach Sirion as part of his training.

Reaching the wall Sirion rushed to clear away a few searching vines growing up the wall and then fumbled for the hand hold. He lifted and pushed with his shoulder making his ribs blaze in pain. The disguised door shifted and swung open with a quiet grating sound as stone ground against stone.

Sirion stopped for moment at his father's tomb to say his apologies to the man. His father would be watching from death's isle, Sirion felt sure his shade would understand.

On the other side of the passageway was small building where family members could come to consult with their dead loved ones without ever setting foot in the tomb. It was an austere place. Two cushions, a variety of statues and burners for incense. Sirion and his thieves moved through the building with almost no sound. There was a single guard stood outside, toying with the idea of sleeping instead of guarding his post. At a signal from Thom, Lundle grabbed the man's mouth from behind and slipped a long dagger into his kidney. The guard died without a sound as Lundle dragged the body back into the austere building.

Sirion paused then. He'd known the man. The guard's name had been Talf, he had been

working for the Tell family for over ten years and now he was dead, because of Sirion.

"Sirion," Thom hissed. "We gotta move."

"He has a wife," Sirion said staring at the corpse in front of him. "Two girls. My father once..."

Thom stepped in front of Sirion and gave him a hard shove. "Ya want ya vengeance or no? 'Cos I promise ya this ain't gonna be the last body ya leave in ya wake. Nor the last one 'at's done nowt wrong. Decide. Now."

Sirion didn't need to think about it, he'd already made his choice. He nodded to Thom and took his place at the head of the group of thieves.

The thieves had a very specific plan. They knew what they wanted to steal; things that could be easily carried and were worth a lot of money. Jewellery, paintings removed from their frames and then rolled up, artefacts imbued with certain magical properties, more curiosities than functional items but they were worth a lot. Sirion had provided them with all the details and lay out of the estate but once inside the thieves went to work like the professionals they were. It would have been impressive to watch but Sirion had his own items to take. He wanted his father's records. With those he could trace the transactions and maybe find out why Drake had turned on his business partner. Sirion wanted to know why Victoria had been killed. He knew where to find his father's books; Sirion had left them in his own room.

Opening the door Sirion was hit by a wave of emotions he couldn't separate. Victoria was everywhere. He could smell her, could see her hand in the way the room was organised. The door to the cupboard that held her clothes hung open, he could almost see her trying her dresses on, trying to find the right one for the right occasion.

Tears rolled down Sirion's cheeks as he looked about the room. His gaze rested on the bed, just over two weeks ago Sirion and Victoria had made love in that bed, and afterwards he had held her in his arms as they slept.

He couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed the records from his desk and bolted from the room almost colliding with someone in the hallway just outside his room.

"Sirion?" said a voice he recognised as belonging to Ballard, his family's chief of staff, the man who ran the day to day of the household.

"My lord," Ballard continued. "It's been weeks. We all thought you and the mistress had run off or... well some thought you might be dead."

"I was," Sirion said, his voice strained, heavy with sorrow. "I am."

Ballard looked confused but shook his head as if dismissing Sirion's words. "There are people in the house, my lord. I think they may be thieves."

"They are. They're with me," Sirion tried to explain. "I need money but... I have to remain dead."

"I don't understand my lord. What ha..."

Sirion didn't see the shadow until it was too late. It had swept along the hall behind Ballard. Without warning it detached from the wall and became one of Thom's thieves, a woman who called herself Red. Her dagger found Ballard's heart before Sirion could react. Ballard's body slumped to the floor with a thud. Sirion stared at the corpse through dull eyes.

"Come," said Red, her voice somehow cold and distant. Sirion obeyed, following the thief back to the others.

"Any problems?" Thom asked Red.

"None," she responded.

"Right. Let's be off," Thom said and then turned to Sirion. "Time t' turn ya into one o'us."

Sirion said nothing. He clutched his father's records to his chest and followed behind the thief to his new life.

Sirion ran a sticky black hand through his hair. It was a time consuming annoyance but it was

also the only way to dye his hair. Once every three weeks he needed to apply the sticky, foul smelling concoction of Thom's own design, wait a full hour and then wash it out using cold water. It left his hair near jet black.

In the year since he had met Thom and his thieves Sirion had found himself greatly changed. Gone were the comfortable clothing made from expensive fabrics. In their place he wore dirty leathers little better than rags designed for flexible movement and easy concealment of weapons. His hair he dyed black and kept at a length long enough to both hide his face or to be tied back as was needed but never too long to become an obstacle. He was no taller, nor any bulkier but Sirion no longer had an ounce of fat on him. He could run, climb, swim or fight for hours without tiring. Thom and his thieves had turned Sirion into a living weapon.

They had taught him to fight with fist, sword, dagger or any item that came to hand. They had taught him how to throw knives with pin point accuracy, how to move with the darkness, to become one with the shadows and how to disguise himself well enough to gain access to any portion of the city and stand next to someone he had known for years without being recognised.

"Fortune jus' sailed into port," Thom said from the doorway of the cupboard Sirion now called his quarters.

"Drake is 'ere?" Sirion asked.

Thom grinned. "Reckon ya ready?"

Sirion knew he was ready. He'd been ready for a month but he'd had to wait for Drake to make port.

"I reckon so," he responded whilst watching Thom's reaction for signs of doubt. There was none.

"I'll get ya targets found. Two hours past night fall."

Sirion nodded and pulled his attention back to the sticky dye. He had only five hours before his hunt began. Before he finally got the chance to avenge Victoria and his father.

He'd spent days looking through his father's records, comparing them with the man's notes. Sirion's father had caused all of it with his greed. He'd found another source to deal with, another pirate, who traded his goods for cheaper than Drake Morrass. By the outcome Sirion guessed Drake had not been pleased with his business partner suddenly backing out of their arrangement and had decided to make an example not just of Sirion's father but of the entire Tell family. It was brutal and barbaric. Sirion had once said as much to Thom, the thief had laughed before pointing out that Drake was a pirate and, as a group, pirates weren't known for their civility.

Sirion finished dyeing his hair and triple checked his weapons. A vast assortment of throwing knives, twenty two in total. Two daggers, one straight bladed, one curved and a short straight bladed sword with a single edge that was sharper than a scalpel. Then Sirion sat down and waited, a nervous excitement making each minute stretch on to eternity.

"Message from Thom," said the runner at the door to Sirion's quarters. "'Ee ses t' begin. Kit's got ya first target. 'Ed east on the 'ighway. Can't miss the fat fuck."

Sirion nodded once and was gone. Once out of the building he had been calling home he span, leapt and began climbing to the roof, hand over hand until he reached the top. Sirion knew which way was east. He'd lived in Truridge almost all his life but only in the last year had he truly come to know the city. Now he knew every street, every alley, every store, every inn, every whore house, every stray, vagabond, bard and snitch. He'd memorised every aspect of the city at Thom's insistence and now he would put it to good use.

The gaps between buildings were about seven feet in most areas, just too long for normal people to leap. But for Sirion and the thieves it was easy. The rooftops became highways for criminals during the nights and they put the highways to frequent use.

Sirion leapt a gap and rolled to his feet, glanced around and spotted Kit. The thief's chunky frame was crouched on a rooftop looking down; he looked like some menacing stone gargoyle.

Moments later Sirion was crouched next to Kit looking into the garden below.

Below was the residence of a lesser merchant, merchant Folken. He wasn't rich enough to have guards but could afford a pretty garden with lush green grass and a small stone fountain with a statue of a half fish, half woman spraying water down her body into the pools below. Stood in the centre of the garden was a fat man Sirion recognised all too well. Belding; the first man who had raped Victoria. He was wearing an ill-fitting brown suit that made him look like a parody of a merchant and he carried flowers.

"Calling on one of the daughters of the house I reckon," whispered Kit.

"Where's the next target?" Sirion asked.

"Red's got a couple tagged near Marc's bakery," Kit responded. This night had taken a great deal of planning and Thom had runners all around the city keeping track of Sirion's targets to make sure everything went as smooth as cold blooded murder could go.

There was a wooden beam a floor down from Sirion. It looked as though it had once meant to be the beginnings of a gate but the construction had long since been abandoned. Still, it looked sturdy enough. Sirion leapt onto the beam and leaned backwards, flipping as he fell so he landed on the soft grass on all fours.

Belding still hadn't noticed, he was too busy waiting for the girl. Sirion drew his curved dagger and took two steps towards his target then hissed through his teeth.

Belding span just as Sirion got close enough to be within striking distance. His dagger slipped through flesh like it was butter, up past the rib cage and into the heart. Belding's expression was a satisfying mixture of pain, shock and fear.

Then he was gone. The body of the fat guardsmen dropped to the floor with a muted thud. Sirion wiped and re-sheathed his dagger and span, sprinting from the garden towards his next target. Behind him he heard a woman scream.

Marc's bakery was no small distance from his first target and Sirion was panting by the time he arrived. Red was leaning against a wall watching him with what passed for amusement on her face. Sirion stopped to catch his breath and wipe sweat from his forehead. He then tied his hair back into a short ponytail.

"Target?" he asked mimicking Red's abruptness.

Red nodded towards a building opposite the bakery. It was old and in disrepair but Sirion knew it was often used as an illegal gambling den.

"Two and others," Red said.

Sirion nodded. "Next target?"

"Whore house on Pol Street."

Sirion knew the place. He started towards the gambling den, a throwing knife appearing in his hand.

The guard at the door to the gambling den was ill prepared to deal with an assailant. He died a silent death and Sirion lowered his body to the floor, careful not to make any noise. Sounds of a betting game could be heard coming from a door to Sirion's right; he peered in through the gap of the door revealing five figures sat around a table, a deck of cards being dealt to each participant. Sirion recognised his two targets, one of the men had held him, and the other had held Victoria. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The man who had held Sirion during the attack a year ago recognised him in an instant. He jumped up, eyes wide with shock and fumbled for his sword. With a flick of his wrist Sirion sent a throwing knife into the man's throat, he hit the ground gurgling in his own blood. Now four men faced Sirion, all with weapons drawn.

Sirion drew his own sword and pointed at his next target.

"I only want that one," he said. "You can keep his money."

There was a moment's uneasy pause before one of the gamblers gave Sirion's target a hard shove in the back, propelling him towards Sirion. The target acted quickly, swinging a spiked club

at Sirion's head. Sirion swayed out of the way of the blow and, with a quick thrust and twist, disembowelled the target and then finished the man with a slash across the throat as he dropped to the ground.

The remaining three men were wary. They all stood, weapons drawn watching Sirion's every move. He backed out of the room then turned and was gone.

Red was still stood outside, waiting to see if Sirion re-emerged. She nodded once in respect as he stepped from the building. Sirion nodded back and then turned and ran, speeding towards his next target.

The whore house on Pol Street was called Jessop's. It was not one of the better quality whore houses in the city. It was, however, cheap and guaranteed a good time. It was also run by the thieves' guild.

Sirion stepped inside. A boy no more than ten years old had been waiting for him. Sirion recognised the boy as one of Thom's runners but didn't know his name.

"Ee's upstairs, second door on left," the boy said, excited in the way only a child can be. "Mistress ses don't 'arm the whore."

"Can't promise anything," said Sirion, a note of menace in his voice. "Next target?"

"Lundle's got two at Wailing Inn, near docks."

Sirion nodded. "Good."

He started towards the stairs. People moved out of his way. It wasn't surprising. He knew the look on his face spoke of murder and the spattering of blood on his clothes didn't help. The mistress followed Sirion's movement with disapproving eyes. Sirion ignored the ageing whore.

He stopped for a moment outside the door, pressing his ear against the wood. He could hear deep grunts coming from inside. Deep, unbearable rage built inside Sirion and another throwing knife appeared in his hand.

Sirion kicked the door open with a booming crash. The man inside rolled off the whore and stared towards Sirion. A moment later a throwing knife pierced his left eye. The whore screamed and scrambled away from the bed, trying to hide in the corner of the room. The man shouted a wordless cry of pain; he wrenched the knife from his eye and flung it across the room. There was already blood everywhere,

Sirion leapt onto the bed to finish his target off. The man felt the movement and rolled away off the bed. Sirion hadn't expected the shift, he lost his footing and fell, his right shoulder bashing hard against the wooden bed post.

Dull agony roared to life in Sirion's shoulder but he managed to ignore it, drew his dagger and stalked over to the target. The man was thrashing about on the floor, screaming. One eye was closed the other a bloody mess.

Sirion knelt over the man, grabbing him around the throat. The man stilled his thrashing but was shaking in both pain and fear. Sirion wanted the man to know who was killing him, he needed him to know.

"Remember me?" Sirion asked, his voice almost unrecognisable in his own ears. "The name's Sirion Tell."

Even with eyes closed dreadful recognition appeared on the man's face. Sirion thrust his dagger into the man's heart. It took only a moment for him to die.

On his way out of the whore house Sirion flicked a single gold coin towards the mistress.

"For the mess," he said, knowing a gold coin would pay for ten times the damage done.

Lundle was sat outside the Wailing Inn enjoying a mug of weak, brown ale. He whistled at Sirion as he appeared.

"Ya look like yer 'avin a good ol'night," the big thief said with a smile.

"Four down. Three t' go," Sirion replied

"Two more in there," Lundle said with a nod towards the inn. "An' eight o'Drakes pirates an all. Bes' leave it fer later."

“Sergeant Kef is in there?” Sirion asked. Lundle responded with a nod.

“Any news on Drake 'imself?” Sirion asked.

“Thom's lookin' fer 'im. Ses t' meet 'im at the 'arbour when ya done, by Drake's ship.”

Sirion nodded. “Good.”

As he started towards the inn Lundle grabbed his arm. “Didn't ya 'ear me? I sed there's ten o'them in there.”

Sirion smiled, a predatory smile, all teeth. “See ya 'round, Lundle.”

He stopped for a moment at the door to the inn, affected a drunken swagger and a bemused expression then opened the door and stumbled inside.

Lundle had been right on the money. Sergeant Kef, the man with the ragged scar that had held Victoria and eight of Drake's pirates occupied the serving area of the inn. No other customers were nearby; they had all been scared away. A bard sat on a table nearby tuning a small string instrument; he was one of Thom's boys, no doubt sent to watch the sergeant.

Nobody looked at the new arrival so Sirion stumbled towards the group. The one with the scar who had held Victoria was closest. He was sat with his back to Sirion.

Sirion stumbled closer then, in a flash, drew his straight edged dagger and stabbed it into the man's neck. He felt it slip in between two vertebrae. A short twist and the man slumped forward dead.

Pirates erupted from their seats all around Sirion. He flicked his wrists and the two nearest pirates went down, one with a throwing knife in his neck, the other with a pierced lung.

A pirate leapt off a table towards Sirion. He stepped to the side avoiding the attack and slashed the pirate's side with his sword opening the man up. The wound was deep enough to kill in seconds. Another pirate aimed a vicious blow at Sirion's head from behind. Sirion dropped out of the way and rolled backwards, slashing the man's Achilles tendon. As the pirate went down Sirion flowed to his feet behind the man and thrust his blade through the man's chest.

The pirates were now trying to surround Sirion. Another flick of his wrist sent a knife into the foot of one pirate. Sirion then threw his sword towards the distracted pirate. The sword slipped through the air and embedded itself in the man's chest.

Sirion span and stepped into the thrust of another pirate, deflecting the blade with another throwing knife. He then thrust an elbow into the man's throat and stepped away drawing his knife down the pirate's outstretched arm, opening up his artery and then plucking the sword from the pirates limp hand.

Sirion threw the sword with all of his strength. The blade was not designed to fly through the air. It span end over end and crashed into another pirate's nose and left cheek. Sirion followed the thrown blade, plucking his own sword from the fallen pirate and finishing the man whose face he had just broken.

Sergeant Kef had his sword drawn but was backing away from Sirion. The sergeant was shaking in fear. The remaining three pirates turned and ran as one. Sirion sent another knife their way and caught one pirate in the back just as he reached the door. The pirate went down in a heap. The other two made it outside but Sirion had no doubt Lundle would stop them from running back to Drake.

Sirion advanced towards Sergeant Kef. Menace and rage and murder surrounded him. His blood pumped with adrenaline and his eyes blazed with righteous fury.

The Sergeant dropped his sword and stood shaking.

“Remember me?” Sirion asked.

“We was just following orders,” the sergeant's words came tumbling out.

“You were ordered to rape my wife, to torture her, to kill her.”

“That's right. It was Drake, he ordered it all.”

Sirion had closed the distance to within striking range. “And you followed those orders.”

Like a lightning strike Sirion's blade slashed across the sergeant's throat.

Kef's eyes went wide and he lurched forward grabbing Sirion round the throat with both hands, blocking off Sirion's breathing with a death grip.

Sirion couldn't breathe but he didn't struggle, he just stared into the man's eyes, watching the light fade from them.

Thom sat perched on top of one of the short posts on the pier. The Fortune was just visible in the darkness, lit as it was by plenty of oil lamps. Thom waited, waited to find out if Sirion would arrive. He'd heard from everyone but Lundle so far.

Sirion had cut a bloody swathe through his targets so far this night. If he survived he'd be here soon enough for his final target.

Thom had never had an apprentice as gifted or as driven as Sirion. In just one year he was already better than most of the thieves guild's assassins.

The sound of padded footsteps alerted Thom to Sirion's arrival before he saw the ex-merchant. He looked tired, drained and wore a lot of blood on his clothing, none of it seemed to be his though.

He appeared out of the darkness and stopped in front of Thom.

"Drake?"

"Not 'ere," Thom said, studying the various marks, stains and cuts on Sirion's clothing.

"Seems 'ee switched ships. Gave t' Fortune t' 'is first mate an' took a new'un. The Lady Luck.

"Where?" Sirion asked, both his voice and eyes were devoid of emotion.

"No way o'knowing. At sea somewhere."

The remaining energy and composure seemed to flow out of Sirion. With a heavy sigh his shoulders slumped and his eyelids drooped. Then he turned and began to walk away.

"Goodbye, Thom. Thank you," Sirion called over his shoulder.

"What? What about Drake? Where ya goin?"

"Dunno. East maybe. I'm done 'ere. Done with Truridge."

Thom opened his mouth to speak but instead watched Sirion go.

After a while the slender form of Red appeared out of the darkness.

"Send word t' Cap'n Drake," Thom instructed Red. "Tell 'im all 'is boys is dead. The murderer is one Sirion Tell an' 'ee can find 'im 'eaded west. Tell 'im the thieves' guild welcomes 'im an' 'is business t' Truridge."

