

The Cuts

Dule rose from bed and stretched, the cords of his massive frame creaking and popping in the morning stillness. Was he getting old? *Bah!* Not yet thirty and as strong as any three normal townsmen. The Shadows wouldn't be getting him for a time yet, not unless some blade or hammer caught him unawares. That was unlikely. He had his enemies, but he was well liked by most. And all, friends and enemies alike, knew that taking a shot at Dule wasn't something to be done lightly. He could crush a skull with his bare hands, if he needed to, and he was anything but unused to a brawl here and there. That was life.

And that was work.

He rose to his feet and pulled on his trousers. His shift would start once the sunlight hit the barracks walls, and he'd better be over at the mine by then or Roruk would have a fit.

No worries, he had time. A brisk pace and he would even be able to swing by the river carts and grab a loaf for breakfast and lunch, buy him a little time for a lie-down in the sun before he took his undershift, deep in the inky bowels of the mines. It was unpleasant, and the stone could get hot, but watching the miners work and slapping the odd one back into line if a squabble broke out was a decent gig, and paid well. He may

have had incidents down there, from time to time, but the masters never heard about it. As long as the men worked and the metal flowed, they could overlook the odd black eye or limp when the men came back up for rest and food.

Suited Dule fine.

He grabbed his belt and stepped out into the Warrens.

Dule was born and raised in Freynar, right there in the Warrens, the deep crack in the cliffs that struck back away from the main part of the city. Dark and damp, with water pouring in at the dead end and rushing out to water the southern half of the city, the Warrens seldom saw sunlight. There was a short time, each year, when the sun rose high enough to cast light on the northern face of the ravine... his headache would last for weeks after that, the alcohol and sweetmeats thick in his veins. No other party of the year raged like the Sun Festival in the Warrens – and nobody else in the city paid it so much as a nod.

But that was good too. Warreners stayed among Warreners, and the fancy folk could have their money and their ways. Dule didn't begrudge them that.

No, he had a good life, and even if he hadn't found a pretty little thing to take to wife yet, he'd found several worth a dalliance while he looked. There was time.

He picked up his loaf and winked at the baker's daughter as she stabbed a lump of butter into it for him, a half-smile on her lips. She was one of those dalliances he had run across. Perhaps he would run across her a little later that night, too, and thank her for that butter.

He moved from there up the rise and to the mine. Roruk was there, as he had expected, watching down the road for those coming in for their shifts. Time wasn't a precise thing, in Freynar, but Roruk didn't seem to know it. He watched that road like everybody there had a Royal Watchman toting an hourglass and a bell. No worry though, Dule wasn't late, not even by loose reckoning.

'They're stirred tonight, Dule. Work cut out for you.'

Dule shrugged.

'Better you than me.'

Dule smiled. Yes, better him than Roruk. A couple of those beasts in the lower shafts would rip Roruk to ribbons, and they knew it. Best leave the discipline to those built for dealing it. Down there, anyway.

'I'm topside first.'

'Nope. Ghery wants you below.'

'Now?'

It was Roruk's time to shrug.

'Alright.' Dule took a big rip of bread from the loaf – the dust below would soil it pretty good and he wanted to taste it first, the clean bread, the butter, the touch of the girl.

Then he stepped toward the dark opening in the cliff.

High above him, atop the promontory that jutted out into the middle of the city, a man walked over polished marble tiles to the green stone railing that skirted the outer edge of the palace sky gardens. The gossamer layers of his white robes rustled in the breeze and he stroked his beard, itself mostly

white, as he frowned down over his city. Behind him, a man in costly blue robes followed, his head lowered but his eyes peeking up through his eyebrows at the man in front of him. The pair stood for some time in silence, then the first one spoke.

‘I don’t like this news from the West, Algar. Not at all.’

‘The West is far away, my king, and as much as our people were bloodied, theirs were bloodied more. There will be fewer savages left to pose any threat. They’ve been cowed.’

‘Have they?’ the king turned to look at his advisor, his expression unconvinced. ‘I put nothing past them. We have no spies in the north on that side of the mountains. No way to know what is happening. Not for certain. And the castle is gone. Even if we wanted to rebuild the wretched place, it would take a decade to have anything defensible.’ He scowled down at the city.

‘King Artun, Your Royal Highness.’

Both men turned toward the new voice. A boy, head shaved and skin oiled and shining in the sun, bowed low as he neared them.

‘Rise.’

‘A message, Your Highness, from the Southmarch.’

The king held out his hand. A note was passed, and he turned to the railing to read it.

‘Good news?’ Algar asked.

The king did not answer.

‘Even without the castle, could we not simply take what we need?’

‘No,’ the king shook his head, his beard catching in the wind, ‘not without a seat of power there. Too dangerous.’

‘We just send thirty or forty armed men in with the cutters, and take what we need. Who would stop us?’

The king turned to Algar then. ‘No one would stop us. True. And then when we call for men to support us in the battle to come, how ready would they be? We would have the spears, the arrows, bows, and tents... lying on the ground, impotent and empty. What good would the lumber do us then, Lord Algar? Tell me that. It was Crogmoor that made it possible. The puppet lord to take what we needed and carry the blame for it too. And now he is... where even is he? Does he yet live? Will the new whelp do as he’s told?’ He turned back to gaze over the city below him. ‘Tell me of this Lord Dirridain.’

‘He is Phaelon Terek’s son. King Gunthrin’s ward, since the death of his parents.’

‘Yes, I know what he is. Tell me of who he is. What manner of man is he?’

‘I know little, in truth. He had only just risen when the messenger rode to tell us on the news. There was something of a scandal before his rise, apparently. Implication in the death of Lord Kreegs.’

‘Hmph! Implication. Anything of substance? Kreegs was an oaf. Any number of reasonable men might take a stab at him, given the chance. Some peasant girl’s father, more likely than not. He was good with a blade, and brave – and most of all he did as he was told when it came to the important things – but hating him was no rare thing.’

'I know not, but there was a trial by combat, and the boy... the young *man*... rose to it.'

The king smiled.

'If half of what was said of it is true,' Algar continued, 'then it was a thrilling event, and not without its divine interventions.'

'Then he may be of use to us.'

'But there is an issue, perhaps, my king.'

'An issue?'

'King Gunthrin.'

'What of him?'

'He has raised the boy. It is said he is fond of him and...'

'And Gunthrin has no heir.'

'Correct, my king.'

'He has none, I have too many.' The king smiled.

'Perhaps Lord Dirridain will not return to the West... perhaps it will remain ruled in absentia.'

'Then instead of a puppet king in a frontier land with good resources, we gain one in a neighbouring land with twice as much to give, with half of the transport time.'

'Only, Your Highness, if King Gunthrin should meet the Shadow.'

The king stood silent. Looked out over the city. 'Leave me now,' he said in a whisper, 'I would be alone a while.'

Algar bowed, made no sound, and moved silently away into the cool shade of the palace interior.

Coming up from the shaft, two long shifts into the day, Dule squinted at the light reflecting from the sandy-brown cliffs of the central promontory. An hour more of light, maybe. He shook off the dust of the caverns below and walked out into the city.

His shift had gone well, mostly. There was one man, a scarred up old scrapper from the west, who had gotten into an argument with a young local, and it had heated close to boiling... but a word or two from Dule had calmed it down, or at least motivated the two men to put a cap on it. That was always easier with the locals. They knew Dule, personally or by reputation, and knew better than to push him too far. The foreigners, as the people of Freynar called anyone not born within the shadows of the cliffs, soon picked up on it too.

His work done, and a few coins more in his purse, and Dule felt pretty good. He set out down the ramp to the lower city and took in a deep breath of the night air. It was stale, and smoke-ridden, and carried the odours of a hundred things foul and fair, but to man who had never been more than a thousand paces from the city gates, and who had spent his long day in the dark of the shafts, it was sweet. He smiled. Rubbed a couple of pennies together in his pocket, and strolled the long way home, through the Gatesides to the Needles, and up the river on the palace side until home. It would be a good walk, stretch his legs out from the standing time in the mine, give him time to think and listen to the sounds of the city as it settled for the evening. And at the end of the walk, the tavern, and then

home. With a little luck, he might even have the chance for some company.

The *Pick and Bucket* was thick with the smell of fresh ale, and the rafters blurred by pipe smoke. Hermun was at it already, belting out a tune, more or less, and prancing around like a giddy child. It was good fun, and the voices of those who knew the words could usually drown out his enthusiastic efforts. This was one Dule knew, too, but he wasn't singing. He was on his third flagon and he had a young blonde thing on his knee telling him stories from her day. Nothing much to hear, but very pleasant to watch, and she was a kind one with just enough flash in her eye to pique his curiosity. Across the room he caught a sharp stare from Elleni, a regular with whom he had spent a private moment or two in the past couple of months. Trouble, maybe... but being fought over was as good a way as any to ensure he had company from one or the other that night, if he played it right. And he wanted company. The day had been good. But he wanted company.

The door opened and cool night air blew in for a moment before he heard the heavy thud of it and the air stilled. With the settling of the air came the settling of the noise in the room as well, starting near the door and moving across to him. As the hush thickened, his eyes moved from the women to the door, and the dark form that stood just inside the tavern.

Some stepped aside, giving him room, and as they did so, all could see the royal seal on his chest, the shaved head with the single shock of dark hair jutting up like a round brush from

the peak of his skull, and the short, broad sword strapped to his side.

Kingsguard.

The man's eyes scanned the room and Dule felt the cool sweat break out on his skin as the gaze neared him and then stopped.

'You,' the man said, his deep voice filling the room without effort, 'Stand up.'

The blonde slipped from his lap and melted into the onlookers. All eyes moved between him and the soldier.

Dule stood. Even if this was going to be something grim, showing his full height would do no damage. Still, he was not keen to have any trouble with Kingsguard. That was a good way to see the Shadow.

'Come with me. You are summoned.'

'Summoned? Where? Who?'

'Do you not see my seal? Who do you think?'

A murmur wove through the room and was mirrored in Dule's heart, as well. What business did he have with anything at the palace? Kingsguard were men who served the royal family itself... what royal could know anything of him? He knew nothing of them.

'I want no trouble,' Dule said.

'Then best you come.'

The two men locked stares, but Dule saw no threat in the soldier's look. Confidence? Skill? Danger? Yes.

But no threat.

'Very well. I'll come. Can you tell me why?'

'I know only to bring you.'

A nod from Dule. He lifted his flagon and poured the last of it down, dropped a penny on the sticky table, and crossed the room.

Through the door, in the cool dark of the night, stood six more men, much like the one he had spoken to. They fell into step behind Dule and the one who was obviously their commander. As they passed through the Domes and up Bar'kside, Dule felt the tension tighten in his muscles and his bowels felt wet. He had passed by the foot of the palace a thousand times in his life, he was sure, but had never so much as touched one of the green stones that melted into the living rock of the place. His feet had never walked a marble floor, though he had heard of them. And yet there he was, watching the great bronze gates part to let him in, escorted by seven fighting men into a brightly lit hall of casual wealth beyond anything he had ever imagined, in waking dream nor fantasy.

He had been summoned to the king.