

Blood Brothers

Thieves' World, #8

by Joe Haldeman, 1943-

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SMILING, BOWING AS the guests leave. A good luncheon, much reassuring talk from the gentry assembled: the economy of Sanctuary is basically sound. Thank you, my new cook... he's from Twand, isn't he a marvel? The host appears to be rather in need of a new diet than anew cook, though the heavy brocades he affects may make him look stouter than he actually is. Good leave... certainly, tomorrow. Tell your aunt I'm thinking of her.

"You will stay, of course, Amar. One departing guest raises an eyebrow slightly, our host a boy-lover. We do have business.

“Enoir, you may release the servants until dawn. Give yourself a free evening as well. We will be dining in the city. And thank you for the excellent service. Here.”

He laughs. “Don’t thank me. Just don’t spend it all on one woman.” As the servant master leaves, our host’s bluff expression fades to one of absolute neutrality. He listens to the servant-master’s progress down the stone steps, overhears him dismissing the servants. Turns and gestures to the pile of cushions by the huge fireplace. The smell of winter’s ashes masked by incense fumes.

“I have a good wine, Amar. Be seated while I fetch it.

“Were you comfortable with our guests?”

“Merchants, indeed. But one does learn from other classes, Don’t you agree?”

He returns with two goblets of wine so purple it is almost black. He sets both goblets in front of Amar: choose. Even closest friends follow this ritual in Sanctuary, where poisoning is art, sport, profession. “Yes, it was the colour that intrigued me. Good fortune.”

“No, it’s from a grove in the mountains, east of Syr. Kalos or something; I could never get my tongue around their barbaric... yes. A good dessert wine. Would you care for a pipe?”

Enoir returns, jingling his bell as he walks up the steps.

“That will be all for today, thank you...”

“No, I don’t want the hounds fed. Better sport Ilday if they’re famished. We can live with their whimpering.”

The heavy front door creaks shut behind the servant-master. “You don’t? You would not be the only noble in attendance. Let your beard grow a day or two, borrow some rag from a servant...”

“Well, there are two schools of thinking. Hungry dogs are weaker but fight with desperation. And if your dogs aren’t fed for a week, there’s a week they can’t be poisoned by the other teams.

“Oh, it does happen—I think it happened to me once. Not a killing poison, just one that makes them listless, uncompetitive. Perhaps a spell. Poison’s cheaper.”

He drinks deeply, then sets the goblet carefully on the floor. He crosses the room and mounts a step and peers through a slot window cut in the deep wall.

“I’m sure we’re alone now. Drink up; I’ll fetch the krrf.” He is gone for less than a minute, and returns with a heavy brick wrapped in soft leather.

Caronne’s finest, pure black, unadulterated. He unfolds the package: ebony block embossed all over its surface with a foreign seal. “Try some?”

He nods. “A wise vintner who avoids his wares. You have the gold?”

He weighs the bag in his hand. “This is not enough. Not by half.”

He listens and hands back the gold. “Be reasonable. If you feel you can’t trust my assay, take a small amount back to Ranke; have anyone test it. Then bring me the price we established.”

The other man suddenly stands and claws at his falchion, but it barely clears its sheath, then clatters on the marble floor. He falls to his hands and knees, trembling, stutters a few words, and collapses.

“No, not a spell, though nearly as swift, Don’t you think? That’s the virtue of coadjutant poisons. The first ingredient you had along with everyone else, in the sauce for the sweetmeats. Everyone but me. The second part was in the wine, part of its sweetness.”

He runs his thumbnail along the block, collecting a pinch of krrf, which he rubs between thumb and forefinger and then sniffs. You really should try it. It makes you feel young and brave. But then you are young and brave, aren't you.

He carefully wraps the krrf up and retrieves the gold. Excuse me. I have to go change. At the door he hesitates. The poison is not fatal; it only leaves you paralysed for a while. Surgeons use it.

The man stares at the floor for a long time. He is conscious of drooling, and other loss of control.

When the host returns, he is barely recognizable. Instead of the gaudy robe, he wears a patched and stained houppelande with a rope for a belt. The pomaded white mane is gone: his bald scalp is creased with a webbed old scar from a swordstroke. His left thumb is missing from the second joint. He smiles, and shows almost as much gap as tooth.

I am going to treat you kindly. There are some who would pay well to use your helpless body, and they would kill you afterwards.

He undresses the limp man, clucking, and again compliments himself for his charity, and the man for his well-kept youth. He lifts the grate in the fireplace and drops the garment down the shaft that serves for disposal of ashes.

In another part of town, I'm known as One-Thumb; here, I cover the stump with a taxidermist's imitation. Convincing, isn't it? He lifts the man easily and carries him through the main door. No fault of yours, of course, but you're distantly related to the magistrate who had my thumb off. The barking of the dogs grows louder as they descend the stairs.

Here we are. He pushes open the door to the kennels. The barking quiets to pleading whines. Ten fighting hounds, each in an individual run, up against its feeding trough, slavering politely, yawning grey sharp fangs.,

We have to feed them separately, of course. So they don't hurt each other.

At the far end of the room is a wooden slab at waist-level, with channels cut in its surface leading to hanging buckets. On the wall above it, a rack with knives, cleavers, and a saw.

He deposits the mute staring man on the slab and selects a heavy cleaver.

I'm sorry, Amar. I have to start with the feet. Otherwise it's a terrible mess.

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THERE ARE PHILOSOPHERS who argue that there is no such thing as evil qua evil: that, discounting spells (which of course relieve an individual of responsibility), when a man commits an evil deed he is the victim himself, the slave of his progeniture and nurturing. Such philosophers might profit by studying Sanctuary.

Sanctuary is a seaport, and its name goes back to a time when it provided the only armed haven along an important caravan route. But the long war ended, the caravans abandoned that route for a shorter one, and Sanctuary declined in status—but not in population, because for every honest person who left to pursue a normal life elsewhere, a rogue drifted in to pursue his normal life.

Now, Sanctuary is still appropriately named, but as a haven for the lawless. Most of them, and the worst of them, are concentrated in that section of town known as the Maze, a labyrinth of streets and nameless alleys and no

churches. There is communion, though, of a rough kind, and much of it goes on in a tavern named the Vulgar Unicorn, which features a sign in the shape of that animal improbably engaging itself, and is owned by the man who usually tends bar on the late shift, an ugly sort of fellow by the name of One-Thumb.

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ONE-THUMB FINISHED feeding the dogs, hosed the place down, and left his estate by way of a long tunnel, that led from his private rooms to the basement of the Lily Garden, a respectable whorehouse a few blocks from the Maze.

He climbed the long steps up from the basement and was greeted by a huge eunuch with a heavy glaive balanced insolently over his shoulder.

“Early today, One-Thumb.”

“Sometimes I like to check on the help at the Unicom.”

“Surprise inspection?”

“Something like that. Is your mistress in?”

“Sleeping. You want a wench?”

“No, just business.”

The eunuch inclined his head. “That’s business.”

“Tell her I have what she asked for, and more, if she can afford it. When she’s free. If I’m not at the Unicorn, I’ll leave word as to where we can meet.”

“I know what it is,” the eunuch said in a singsong voice. “Instant maidenhead.” One-Thumb hefted the leather-wrapped brick. “One pinch, properly inserted, turns you into a girl again.”

The eunuch rolled his eyes. “An improvement over the old method.”

One-Thumb laughed along with him. “I could spare a pinch or so, if you’d care for it.”

“Oh... not on duty.” He leaned the sword against the wall and found a square of parchment in his money-belt. “I could save it for my off time, though.” One Thumb gave him a pinch. He stared at it before folding it up. “Black... Caronne?”

“The best.”

“You have that much of it.” He didn’t reach towards his weapon. One-Thumb’s free hand rested on the pommel of his rapier. “For sale, twenty grimaes.”

“A man with no scruples would kill you for it.” Gap-toothed smile. “I’m doubly safe with you, then.” The eunuch nodded and tucked away the krrf, then retrieved the broadsword. “Safe with anyone not a stranger.” Everyone in the Maze knew of the curse that One-Thumb expensively maintained to protect his life: if he were killed, his murderer would never die, but live forever in helpless agony:

*Burn as the stars burn;
Burn on after they die.
Never to the peace of ashes.
Out of sight and succour
From men or gods or ghost:
To the ends of time, burn.*

One-Thumb himself suspected that the spell would only be effective for as long as the sorcerer who cast it lived, but that was immaterial. The reputation of the

sorcerer, Mizraith, as well as the severity of the spell, kept blades in sheaths and poison out of his food.

"I'll pass the message on. Many thanks."

"Better mix it with snuff, you know. Very strong." One-Thumb parted a velvet curtain and passed through the foyer, exchanging greetings with some of the women who lounged there in soft veils (the cut and colour of the veils advertised price, and in some cases, curious specialties), and stepped out into the waning light of the end of day.

The afternoon had been an interesting array of sensations for a man whose nose was as refined as it was large. First the banquet, with all its aromatic Tward delicacies, then the good rare wine with a delicate tang of half-poison, then the astringent krrf sting, the rich charnel smell of butchery, the musty sweat of the tunnel's rock walls, perfume and incense in the foyer, and now the familiar stink of the street. As he walked through the gate into the city proper, he could tell the wind was westering; the earthy smell from the animal pens had a slight advantage over the tanners' vats of rotting urine. He even sorted out the delicate cucumber fragrance of freshly butchered fish, like a whisper in a jabbering crowd; not many snouts had such powers of discrimination. As ever, he enjoyed the first few minutes within the city walls, before the reek stunned even his nose to dullness.

Most of the stalls in the Farmer's Market were shuttered now, but he was able to trade two coppers for a fresh melon, which he peeled as he walked into the bazaar, the krrf inconspicuous under his arm.

He haggled for a while with a coppersmith, new to the bazaar, for a brace of lamps to replace the ones that had been stolen from the Unicorn last night. He would send one of his urchins around to pick them up. He watched the acrobats for a while, then went to the various wine merchants for bids on the next week's ordinaries. He ordered a hundredweight of salt meat, sliced into snacks, to be delivered that night, and checked the guild hall of the mercenaries to find a hall guard more sober than the one who had allowed the lamps to be stolen. Then he went down to the Wideway and had an early dinner of raw fish and crab fritters. Fortified, he entered the Maze.

As the eunuch had said, One-Thumb had nothing to fear from the regular denizens of the Maze. Desperadoes who would disembowel children for sport (a sport sadly declining since the introduction of a foolproof herbal abortifacient) tipped their hats respectfully, or stayed out of his way. Still, he was careful. There were always strangers, often hot to prove themselves, or desperate for the price of bread or wine; and although One-Thumb was a formidable opponent with or without his rapier, he knew he looked rather like an overweight merchant whose ugliness interfered with his trade.

He also knew evil well, from the inside, which is why he dressed shabbily and displayed no outward sign of wealth. Not to prevent violence, since he knew the poor were more often victims than the rich, but to restrict the class of his possible opponents to those who would kill for coppers. They generally lacked skill.

On the way to the Unicorn, on Serpentine, a man with the conspicuously casual air of a beginner pickpocket fell in behind him. One-Thumb knew that the alley was coming up and would be in deep shadow, and it had a hiding-niche a few

paces inside. He turned into the alley and, drawing the dagger from his boot, slipped into the niche and set the krrf between his feet.

The man did follow, proof enough, and when his steps faltered at the darkness, One-Thumb spun out of the niche behind him, clamped a strong hand over his mouth and nose, and methodically slammed the stiletto into his back, time and again, aiming for kidneys. When the man's knees buckled, One-Thumb let him down slowly, slitting his throat for silence. He took the money-belt and a bag of coin from the still-twitching body, cleaned and replaced his dagger, picked up the krrf, and resumed his stroll down the Serpentine. There were a few bright spatters of blood on his houppelande, but no one on that street would be troubled by it. Sometimes guardsmen came through, but not to harass the good citizens nor criticize their quaint customs.

Two in one day, he thought; it had been a year or more since the last time that happened. He felt vaguely good about it, though neither man had been much of a challenge. The cutpurse was a clumsy amateur and the young noble from Ranke a trusting fool (whose assassination had been commissioned by one of his father's ministers).

He came up the street south of the Vulgar Unicorn's entrance and let himself in the back door. He glanced at the inventory in the storeroom and noted that it must have been a slow day, and went through to his office. He locked up the krrf in a strongbox and then poured himself a small glass of lemony aperitif, and sat down at the one-way mirror that allowed him to watch the bar unseen.

For an hour he watched money and drink change hands. The bartender, who had been the cook aboard a pirate vessel until he'd lost a leg, seemed good with the customers and reasonably honest, though he gave short measures to some of the more intoxicated patrons—probably not out of concern for their welfare. He started to pour a third glass of the liqueur and saw Amoli, the Lily Garden's mistress, come into the place, along with the eunuch and another bodyguard. He went out to meet them.

"Wine over here," he said to a serving wench, and escorted the three to a curtained-off table.

Amoli was almost beautiful, though she was scarcely younger than One-Thumb, in a trade that normally aged one rapidly. She came to the point at once: "Kalem tells me you have twenty grimales of Caronne for sale."

"Prime and pure."

"That's a rare amount." One-Thumb nodded. "Where, may I ask, did it come from?"

"I'd rather not say."

"You'd better say. I had a twenty-grimale block in my bedroom safe. Yesterday it was stolen."

One-Thumb didn't move or change expression. "That's an interesting coincidence."

She snorted. They sat without speaking while a pitcher of wine and four glasses were slipped through the curtain.

"Of course I'm not accusing you of theft," she said. "But you can understand why I'm interested in the person you bought it from."

"In the first place, I didn't buy it. In the second, it didn't come from Sanctuary."

"I can't afford riddles, One-Thumb. Who was it?"

"That has to remain secret. It involves a murder."

"You might be involved in another," she said tightly.

One-Thumb slowly reached down and brought out his dagger. The bodyguards tensed. He smiled, and pushed it across the table to Amoli. "Go ahead, kill me. What happens to you will be rather worse than going without krrf."

"Oh—" She knocked the knife back to him. "My temper is short nowadays. I'm sorry. But the krrf's not just for me; most of my women use it, and take part of their pay in it, which is why I like to buy in large amounts." One-Thumb was pouring the wine; he nodded. "Do you have any idea how much of my capital was tied up in that block?"

He replaced the half-full glasses on the round serving tray and gave it a spin. "Half?"

"And half again of that. I will get it back, One-Thumb!" She selected a glass and drank.

"I hope you do. But it can't be the same block."

"Let me judge that—have you had it for more than two days?"

"No, but it must have left Ranke more than a week ago. It came on the Anenday caravan. Hidden inside a cheese."

"You can't know for sure that it was on the caravan all the time. It could have been waiting here until the caravan came."

"I can hear your logic straining, Amoli."

"But not without reason. How often have you seen a block as large as twenty grimaes!"

"Only this time," he admitted.

"And is a pressed design stamped all over it uniformly, an eagle within a circle?"

"It is. But that only means a common supplier, his mark."

"Still, I think you owe me information."

One-Thumb sipped his wine. "All right. I know I can trust the eunuch. What about the other?"

"I had a vassal spell laid on him when I bought him. Besides... show him your tongue, Gage." The slave opened his mouth and showed pink scar tissue nested in bad teeth. "He can neither speak nor write."

"We make an interesting table," he said. "Missing thumb, tongue, and tamale. What are you missing, Amoli?"

"Heart. And a block of krrf."

"All right." He drank off the rest of his small glass and refilled it. "There is a man high in the court of Ranke, old and soon to die. His son, who would inherit his title, is slothful, incompetent, dishonest. The old man's counsellors would rather the daughter succeed; she is not only more able, but easier for them to control."

"I think I know the family you speak of," Amoli said.

"When I was in Ranke on other business, one of the counsellors got in touch with me, and commissioned me to dispose of this young pigeon, but to do it in Sanctuary. The twenty grimaes was my pay, and also the goad, the bait. The boy is no addict, but he is greedy, and the price of krrf is three times higher in the court of Ranke than it is in the Maze. It was arranged for me to befriend him and, eventually, offer to be his wholesaler."

“The counsellor procured the krrf from Caronne and sent word to me. I sent back a tempting offer to the boy. He contrived to make the journey to Sanctuary, supposedly to be introduced to the Emperor’s brother. He’ll miss the appointment.”

“That’s his blood on your sleeve?” the eunuch asked.

“Nothing so direct; that was another matter. When he’s supposed to be at the palace tomorrow, he’ll be floating in the harbour, disguised as the shit of dogs.”

“So you got the krrf and the boy’s money as well,” Amoli said.

“Half the money. He tried to rob me.” He refilled the woman’s glass. “But you see. There can be no connection.”

“I believe there may be. At noonday was when mine disappeared.”

“Did you keep it wrapped in a cheese?”

She ignored that. “Who delivered yours?”

“Marype, the youngest son of my sorcerer Mizraith. He does all of my caravan deliveries.”

The eunuch and Amoli exchanged glances. “That’s it! It was from Marype I bought the block. Not two hours after the caravan came in.” Her face was growing red with fury.

One-Thumb drummed his fingers on the table. “I didn’t get mine till evening,” he admitted.

“Sorcery?”

“Or some more worldly form of trickery,” One-Thumb said slowly. “Marype is studying his father’s trade, but I don’t think he’s adept enough to transport material objects... could your krrf have been an illusion?”

“It was no illusion. I tried a pinch.”

“Do you recall from what part of the block you took it?”

“The bottom edge, near one corner.”

“Well, we can settle one thing,” he said, standing. “Let’s check mine in that spot.”

She bade the bodyguards stay, and followed One-Thumb. At the door to his office, while he was trying to make the key work, she took his arm and moved softly up against him. “You never tarry at my place any more. Are you keeping your own woman, out at the estate? Did we do something—”

“You can’t have all my secrets, woman.” In fact, for more than a year he had not taken a woman normally, but needed the starch of rape. This was the only part of his evil life that shamed him, and certainly not because of the women he had hurt and twice killed. He dreaded weakness more than death, and wondered which part would fail him next.

Amoli idly looked through the one-way mirror while One-Thumb attended to the strongbox. She turned when she heard him gasp.

“Gods!” The leather wrapping lay limp and empty on the floor of the box.

They both stared for a moment. “Does Marype have his father’s protection?” Amoli asked.

One-Thumb shook his head. “It was the father that did this.”

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SORCERERS ARE NOT omnipotent. They can be bargained with. They can even be killed, with stealth and surprise. And spells cannot normally be maintained without effort; a good sorcerer might hold six or a dozen at once. It was Mizraith's fame that he maintained past a hundred, although it was well known that he did this by casting secondary spells on lesser sorcerers, tapping their power unbeknownst. Still, gathering all these strings and holding them, as well as the direct spells that protected his life and fortune, used most of his concentration, giving him a distracted air. The unwary might interpret this as senility—a half-century without sleep had left its mark—and might toy to take his purse or life, as their last act.

But Mizraith was rarely seen on the streets, and certainly never near the noise and smell of the Maze. He normally kept to his opulent apartments in the easternmost part of town, flanked by the inns of Wideway, overlooking the sea.

One-Thumb warned the pirate cook that he might have to take a double shift, and took a bottle of finest brandy to give to Mizraith, and a skin of the ordinary kind to keep up their courage as they went to face the man who guarded his life. The emptied skin joined the harbour's flotsam before they'd gone half of Wideway, and they continued in grim silence.

Mizraith's eldest son let them in, not seeming surprised at their visit. "The bodyguards stay here," he said, and made a pass with one hand. "You'll want to leave all your iron here, as well."

One-Thumb felt the dagger next to his ankle grow warm; he tossed it away and also dropped his rapier and the dagger sheathed to his forearm. There was a similar scattering of weapons from the other three. Amoli turned to the wall and reached inside her skirts, inside herself, to retrieve the ultimate birth control device, a sort of diaphragm with a spring-loaded razor attached (no one would have her without paying in some coin). The hardware glowed dull red briefly, then cooled.

"Is Marype at home?" One-Thumb asked.

"He was, briefly," the older brother said. "You came to see Father, though." He turned to lead them up a winding flight of stairs.

Velvet and silk embroidered in arcane patterns. A golden samovar bubbling softly in the corner; flower-scented tea. A naked girl, barely of childbearing age, sitting cross-legged by the samovar, staring. A bodyguard much larger than the ones downstairs, but slightly transparent. In the middle of this sat Mizraith, on a pile of pillows, or maybe of gold, bright eyes in dark hollows, smiling open-mouthed at something unseeable.

The brother left them there. Magician, guardian, and girl all ignored them. "Mizraith?" One-Thumb said.

The sorcerer slowly brought his eyes to bear on him and Amoli.

"I've been waiting for you, Lastel, or what is your name in the Maze, One-Thumb... I could grow that back for you, you know."

"I get along well enough—"

"And you brought me presents! A bottle and a bauble—more my age than this sweetmeat." He made a grotesque face at the naked girl and winked.

“No, Mizraith, this woman and I, we both believe we’ve been wronged by you. Cheated and stolen from,” he said boldly, but his voice shook. “The bottle is a gift.”

The bodyguard moved towards them, its steps making no noise. “Hold, spirit.” It stopped, glaring. “Bring that bottle here.”

As One-Thumb and Amoli walked towards Mizraith, a low table materialized in front of him, then three glasses. “You may serve, Lastel.” Nothing had moved but his head.

One-Thumb poured each glass full; one of them rose a handspan above the table and drained itself, then disappeared. “Very good. Thank you. Cheated, now? My, oh my. Stolen? Hee. What could you have that I need?”

“It’s only we who need it, Mizraith, and I don’t know why you would want to cheat us out of it—especially me. You can’t have many commissions more lucrative than mine.”

“You might be surprised, Lastel. You might be surprised. Tea?” The girl decanted a cup of tea and brought it over, as if in a trance. Mizraith took it and the girl sat at his side, playing with her hair. “Stolen, eh? What? You haven’t told me. What?”

“Krrf,” he said.

Mizraith gestured negligently with his free hand and a small snowstorm of grey powder drifted to the rug, and disappeared.

“No.” One-Thumb rubbed his eyes. When he looked at the pillows, they were pillows; when he looked away, they turned to blocks of gold. “Not conjured krrf.” It had the same gross effect but no depth, no nuance.

“Twenty grimalles of black krrf from Caronne,” Amoli said.

“Stolen from both of us,” One-Thumb said. “It was sent to me by a man in Ranke, payment for services rendered. Your son Marype picked it up at the caravan depot, hidden inside a cheese. He extracted it somehow and sold it to this woman, Amoli—”

“Amoli? You’re the mistress of a... of the Slippery Lily?”

“No, the Lily Garden. The other place is in the Maze, a good place for pox and slatterns.”

One-Thumb continued. “After he sold it to her, it disappeared. He brought it to me last night. This evening, it disappeared from my own strongbox.”

“Marype couldn’t do that,” Mizraith said.

“The conjuring part, I know he couldn’t—which is why I say that you must have been behind it. Why? A joke?”

Mizraith sipped. “Would you like tea?”

“No. Why?”

He handed the half-empty cup to the girl. “More tea.” He watched her go to the samovar. “I bought her for the walk. Isn’t that fine? From behind, she could be a boy.”

“Please, Mizraith. This is financial ruin for Amoli and a gross insult to me.”

“A joke, eh? You think I make stupid jokes?”

“I know that you do things for reasons I cannot comprehend,” he said tactfully. “But this is serious—”

“I know that!” He took the tea and fished a flower petal from it; rubbed it away. “More serious than you think, if my son is involved. Did it all disappear? Is there any tiny bit of it left?”

“The pinch you gave to my eunuch,” Amoli said. “He may still have it.”

“Fetch it,” Mizraith said. He stared slack-jawed into his tea for a minute. “I didn’t do it, Lastel. Some other did.”

“With Marype’s help.”

“Perhaps unwilling. We shall see... Marype is adept enough to have sensed the worth of the cheese, and I think he is worldly enough to recognize a block of rare krrf, and know where to sell it. By himself, he would not be able to charm it away.”

“You fear he’s betrayed you?”

Mizraith caressed the girl’s long hair. “We have had some argument lately. About his progress... he thinks I am teaching him too slowly, withholding... mysteries. The truth is, spells are complicated. Being able to generate one is not the same as being able to control it; that takes practice, and maturity. He sees what his brothers can do and is jealous, I think.”

“You can’t know his mind directly?”

“No. That’s a powerful spell against strangers, but the closer you are to a person, the harder it is. Against your own blood... no. His mind is closed to me.”

Amoli returned with the square of parchment. She held it out apologetically. “He shared it with the other bodyguard and your son. Is this enough?” There was a dark patch in the centre of the square.

He took it between thumb and forefinger and grimaced. “Markmor!” The second most powerful magician in Sanctuary—an upstart not even a century old.

“He’s in league with your strongest competitor?” One-Thumb said.

“In league or in thrall.” Mizraith stood up and crossed his arms. The bodyguard disappeared; the cushions became a stack of gold bricks. He mumbled some gibberish and opened his arms wide.

Marype appeared in front of him. He was a handsome lad: flowing silver hair, striking features. He was also furious, naked, and rampant.

“Father, I am busy” He made a flinging gesture and disappeared.

Mizraith made the same gesture and the boy came back. “We can do this all night. Or you can talk to me.”

Noticeably less rampant. “This is unforgiveable.” He raised his arm to make the pass again; then checked it as Mizraith did the same. “Clothe me.” A brick disappeared, and Marype was wearing a tunic of woven gold.

“Tell me you are not in the thrall of Markmor.”

The boy’s fists were clenched. “I am not.”

“Are you quite certain?”

“We are friends, partners. He is teaching me things.”

“You know I will teach you everything, eventually. But—”

Marype made a pass and the stack of gold turned to a heap of stinking dung. “Cheap,” Mizraith said, wrinkling his nose. He held his elbow a certain way and the gold came back. “Don’t you see he wants to take advantage of you?”

“I can see that he wants access to you. He was quite open about that.”

“Stefab,” Mizraith whispered. “Nesteph.”

“You need the help of my brothers?”

The two older brothers appeared, flanking Mizraith. "What I need is some sense out of you." To the others: "Stay him!"

Heavy golden chains bound his wrists and ankles to sudden rings in the floor. He strained and one broke; a block of blue ice encased him. The ice began to melt.

Mizraith turned to One-Thumb and Amoli. "You weaken us with your presence." A bar of gold floated over to the woman. "That will compensate you. Lastel, you will have the krrf, once I take care of this. Be careful for the next few hours. Go."

As they backed out, other figures began to gather in the room. One-Thumb recognized the outline of Markmor flickering.

In the foyer, Amoli handed the gold to her eunuch. "Let's get back to the Maze," she said. "This place is dangerous."

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ONE-THUMB SENT the pirate cook home and spent the rest of the night in the familiar business of dispensing drink and krrf and haggling over rates of exchange. He took a judicious amount of krrf himself—the domestic kind—to keep alert. But nothing supernatural happened, and nothing more exciting than a routine eye-gouging over a dice dispute. He did have to step over a deceased ex patron when he went to lock up at dawn. At least he'd had the decency to die outside, so no report had to be made.

One reason he liked to take the death-shift was the interesting ambience of Sanctuary in the early morning. The sunlight was hard, revealing rather than cleansing. Litter and excrement in the gutters. A few exhausted revellers, staggering in small groups or sitting half-awake, blade out, waiting for a bunk to clear at first bell. Dogs nosing the evening's remains. Decadent, stale, worn, mortal. He took dark pleasure in it. Double pleasure this morning, a slight krrf overdose singing death-song in his brain.

He almost went east, to check on Mizraith. "Be careful the next few hours" that must have meant his bond to Mizraith made him somehow vulnerable in the weird struggle with Markmor over Marype. But he had to go back to the estate and dispose of the bones in the dogs' troughs, and then be Lastel for a noon meeting.

* * * * *

THERE WAS ONE drab whore in the waiting-room of the Lily Garden, who gave him a thick smile and then recognized him and slumped back to doze. He went through the velvet curtain to where the eunuch sat with his back against the wall, glaive across his lap.

He didn't stand. "Any trouble, One-Thumb?"

"No trouble. No krrf, either." He heaved aside the bolt on the massive door to the tunnel. "For all I know, it's still going on. If Mizraith had lost, I'd know by now, I think."

"Or if he'd won," the eunuch said.

"Possibly. I'll be in touch with your mistress if I have anything for her." One Thumb lit the waiting lamp and swung the door closed behind him.

Before he'd reached the bottom of the stairs, he knew something was wrong. Too much light. He turned the wick all the way down; the air was slightly glowing. At the foot of the stairs, he set down the lamp, drew his rapier, and waited.

The glow coalesced into a fuzzy image of Mizraith. It whispered, "You are finally in dark, Lastel. One-Thumb. Listen: I may die soon. Your charm, I've transferred to Stefab, and it holds. Pay him as you've paid me..." He wavered, disappeared, came back. "Your krrf is in this tunnel. It cost more than you can know." Darkness again.

One-Thumb waited a few minutes more in the darkness and silence (fifty steps from the light above) before re-lighting the lamp. The block of krrf was at his feet. He tucked it under his left arm and proceeded down the tunnel, rapier in hand. Not that steel would be much use against sorcery, if that was to be the end of this. But an empty hand was less.

The tunnel kinked every fifty steps or so, to restrict line-of-sight. One-Thumb went through three corners and thought he saw light at the fourth. He stopped, doused the lamp again, and listened. No footfalls. He set down the krrf and lamp and filled his left hand with a dagger, then headed for the light. It didn't have to be magic; three times he had surprised interlopers in the tunnel. Their husks were secreted here and there, adding to the musty odour.

But no stranger this time. He peered around the corner and saw Lastel himself, waiting with sword out.

"Don't hold back there," his alter ego said. "Only one of us leaves this tunnel."

One-Thumb raised his rapier slowly. "Wait... if you kill me, you die forever. If I kill you, the same. This is a sorcerer's trap."

"No, Mizraith's dead."

"His son is holding the spell."

Lastel advanced, crabwise, dueller's gait. "Then how am I here?"

One-Thumb struggled with his limited knowledge of the logic of sorcery. Instinct moved him forward, point in line, left-hand weapon ready for side parry or high block. He kept his eye on Lastel's point, krrf-steady as his own. The krrf sang doom, and lifted his spirit.

It was like fencing with a mirror. Every attack drew instant parry, remise, parry, remise, parry, re-remise, break to counter. For several minutes, a swift yet careful ballet, large twins mincing, the tunnel echoing clash: One-Thumb knew he had to do something random, unpredictable; he lunged with a cut-over, impressing to the right.

Lastel knew he had to do something random, unpredictable; he lunged with a double-disengage, impressing to the right.

They missed each other's blades
Slammed home.

One-Thumb saw his red blade emerge from the rich brocade over Lastel's back, tried to shout and coughed blood over his killer's shoulder. Lastel's rapier had cracked breastbone and heart and slit a lung as well.

They clung to each other. One-Thumb watched bright blood spurt from the other's back and heard his own blood falling, as the pain grew. The dagger still in his left hand, he stabbed, almost idly. Again he stabbed. It seemed to take a long time. The pain grew. The other man was doing the same. A third stab, he watched

the blade rise and slowly fall, and inching slide back out of the flesh. With every second, the pain seemed to double; with every second, the flow of time slowed by half. Even the splash of blood was slowed, like a viscous oil falling through water as it sprayed away. And now it stopped completely, a thick scarlet web frozen there between his dagger and Lastel's back—his own back—and as the pain spread and grew, marrow itself on fire, he knew he would look at that for ever. For a flickering moment he saw the image of two sorcerers, smiling.

