

The Talisman's Trinket

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I

The Moon in Splendor was full that night.

Apprentice thieves laughed, and drank, and diced as always. Roughly every hour the plates mounted on the walls rattled as next door; for reasons best known to themselves, an obscure lay brotherhood let fall a rock, from a considerable height, on a bound chicken. Three plates had fallen so far.

All, in a word, was normal.

However, a feverish unease gave an edge to the prentices' sport and to the shouts with which they toasted each shattering platter. After all, it was only two days since the Sirdan Theocandi had beaten his opponent Men-dalis in the Thieves' Guild Election. By now the defeated thief lord should either have fled or

fallen prey to an assassin's wiles. Instead, he had shut himself up in his fortress-like headquarters and there awaited gods only knew what developments.

A burly journeyman shoved his way onto the bench, thrusting drinkers aside, joggling Patches' hand. Beer splashed on the crazy quilt of her sleeve—black velvet, forest green linen, purple satin, carefully pieced together by her mother out of a dozen different rag bags.

"Still waiting, ha?" he said with a booming laugh, jostling her again with an unwelcome elbow to her ribs. He was very drunk. "I said old Penari and your precious Talisman couldn't pull it off. You owe me three coppers, Townie."

Patches moved her mug out of his reach. "Not yet, Denish, and watch where you put your damned hands. Is that blood on your shirt?"

He started back, showing the whites of his eyes, and jerked shut the lapels of his coat. "Don't you know wine stains when you see them? Then again, when have you ever been able to afford anything but small beer?"

His knife-fighter's *d'hen* jacket was royal blue, marking him as one of Men-dalis's followers. Many more were at the Moon that night than one would have expected, given their master's defeat. That was another strange thing, along with Men-dalis's continued existence: By now his followers should have melted back into the body of the guild, hoping that their former alliance would be overlooked. That should hold especially true for Denish, who was one of Men-dalis's inner circle with a reputation for doing his master's dirty work. Why was he so on edge? What were they all waiting for?

Patches herself anxiously awaited news that Jame and her master Penari had successfully stolen the fabled second Eye of the idol Abarraden. Penari had snatched the first orb half a century ago, making him even more respected in the guild than the Sirdan his brother, who had chosen politics over craft. Now, however, Penari was old, and blind. It was the Talisman's skill on which Patches had wagered money that she didn't possess.

Her thoughts slid back to earlier that evening, when she had conveyed Penari's message to his prentice that he wanted to celebrate her promotion to journeyman. After nights of nursing the dying dancer Taniscent, Jame had looked exhausted, but shadowed eyes couldn't hide the fine, attenuated bones of her face or the supernatural grace of her movements. Perhaps both came of being a Kencyr, one of the few in Tai-tastigon, perhaps in all of Rathillien as far as Patches knew, including that odd New Pantheon god Dalis-sar who was rumored to be not only Kencyr but Men-dalis's father and whom Dally proudly claimed as his stepfather. Temple concubines made for some odd family trees.

More than looks and lineage, though, Patches admired the Talisman for her achievements. Like herself, Jame had started out as an outsider but had won grudging respect for her skill, matched by amusement at her refusal either to lie or to steal anything truly valuable.

An honorable thief. Who had ever heard of such a thing?

That also had to do with being Kencyr, although Patches didn't really understand why.

She had warned Jame not to go out that evening, given the unsettled state of the city.

"One wrong move now and bang! Guild war. That sort of thing, no one wins."

"Sounds like a good time to go hide under a haystack," Jame had replied with that wry, twisted smile of hers that seemed so at odds with the clean-cut lines of her face, as if she were at perpetual war with her own destiny. "What about Dally? How is he managing?"

"Wouldn't know. No one's seen him since the Election. I expect he's holed up in the fortress with his brother."

Patches could have said more, but the rest hadn't seemed important at the time. Then as now, she was more concerned that, despite her warnings, the Talisman had indeed gone out to meet her master and there at the Crossed Stars one of the Sirdan's henchmen had challenged Penari to repeat his great feat of so many years ago.

Denish slapped the table, making cups jump. Gods, but he was wild tonight, as if desperate for distraction. "More wine, and bring some for our Talisman's pet trinket, here. D'you know how this little Townie got into the Guild in the first place?"

"We all know," said Raffing, sitting opposite. "Pipe down, Den."

Denish ignored him. "Remember her brother, Scamp? He challenged the Talisman to steal something important for once and she did: the Peacock Gloves. Oh, they were nothing compared to the other treasures in the Tower of Demons, but still. Then what, monkey-face, heh?"

Patches tried not to squirm, either at the history lesson or at the reference to her own unfortunate features. "My brother accused her of lying. They fought. He lost."

"And his master disowned him. And he hanged himself."

"And the Talisman gave Patches the gloves to buy her way into the Guild," Raffing finished impatiently. "So what?"

"So how does it feel to owe everything to your brother's murderer?"

Patches glowered into her drink rather than meet his challenging leer. Murderer be damned. As far as she was concerned, Scamp had played the fool from beginning to end.

A young prentice burst into the tavern, wildly excited. "They did it, they did it!" he crowed. "The Eye is taken! And guess what? All this fuss and it turned out to be nothing but glass after all!"

Patches relaxed, relieved. She had wondered how Jame was going to get around her self-imposed restriction only to steal things of little or no value.

"Seems you owe Patches three coppers after all," said Raffing with a grin.

"What?" Denish hardly appeared to be listening, or not at least to anything in the tavern. "Don't be daft. You heard the boy: the Eye was worthless."

"But not the skill that it took to steal it."

"Never mind," said Patches as Denish lurched to his feet.

Other thieves had also risen and were craning to listen to an approaching uproar in the street. Denish bulled his way out the door of the Moon.

"What d'you mean, *never mind*?" Raffing hissed under cover of the growing commotion. "I know how empty your pockets are."

"Do you?"

She drew out two coppers, a clipped silver coin, and something that flashed gold. Raffish gaped. "You picked his purse! But how? Everyone knows that he carries his valuables in a sealed inner pocket."

What no one knew, not even Jame, was that Patches had the knack of reaching through things to take what she wanted. Mere fabric, even reinforced with metal mesh, was no obstacle. It was only a knack, though, not something of which she was particularly proud, compared to genuine skill. Mostly what she stole automatically became the property of her master, but surely he wouldn't begrudge her such small pickings as these.

She examined the gold item. It was a button with a monogram inscribed on it. Being illiterate, Patches didn't know what the latter meant, but it did look familiar. She also noted dark specks on it like splashes of dried wine... or blood.

"The Square!" someone outside shouted. "The Mercy Seat! Gods, come and see!" The tavern emptied out. Her curiosity piqued at last, Patches rose to follow.

II

The crowd swept her up and hurtled her toward the Judgment Square at Taitastigon's center. Nearly there, she met a figure in a cream velvet *d'hen* walking blindly back against the flood. It was Darinby, one of Jame's few friends among the Guild's upper ranks. The mob thrust Patches into his arms.

"What's happening?" she gasped, clinging to him.

He looked down at her without focusing.

"Go back," he said. "I told Jame as much but she wouldn't listen. Don't follow her."

Then the crowd pulled them apart.

Go back? Not if the Talisman had gone before her. Patches pressed on.

Here was the great square, surging with people. Every thief in the city seemed to be there, in Men-dalis's royal blue or the Sirdan's austere black. The Mercy Seat loomed at its center, occupied.

Steal a peach, steal a plum, see to what your carcass comes...

Patches wriggled through the mob, for once glad of her stunted, wiry stature. By common accord, all had left an open space around the seat, and in front of it knelt the Talisman, bent over, retching.

Oh, that terrible figure lolling on the stone chair, that busy buzz of flies. Dally appeared to be clothed in a garment of black and white diamonds—where his skin was, where it was not, the margins blurred with a seething coat of flies. Only his face remained unmarked, as if to make the rest more unbearable. Spread over the chair's back was his royal blue coat. Gold monogrammed buttons glittered down its front, all except where one was missing at the throat.

"This is Bane's doing!" howled a voice in the crowd. Patches recognizes Denish's cracked bellow, taken up by many more. "The Sirdan's journeyman has done this!"

Those in black drew back, confused, appalled. Those in blue surged forward.

"This is war!"

Patches wrenched her eyes from that terrible figure, that handsome, easy going boy of whom (admit it) she had been so jealous.

“Storm the Guild Palace! Make Bane and his master pay!”

“But that’s not right,” she thought. “I have to tell Jame.”

The space around the chair flooded with people. Jame had disappeared. No, there she was, pushing her way through Theocandi’s stunned followers, Mendalis’s men roaring on her heels. If she was bound for the Palace, she would never make it before the mob. On the edge of the crowd, however, she burst free, flung herself at a wall, and began to climb. A figure rose above the ramparts to strike her down, then instead grabbed her arm to help her up. Patches remembered that Jame had friends among the roof-top dwelling Cloudies.

She would have followed, but the crowd swept her on, half the time off of her feet altogether.

They were in Fleshshambles Street now among the butchers’ closed shops. Ahead, cresting the River Tone, rose the prow of Ship Island where the Thieves’ Guild Palace resided.

Someone grabbed Patches’ bare wrist and twisted her around. Denish shook her. His eyes were blood shot and his breath stank like a slaughter house.

“What did you do with it, brat? Oh, I felt you rubbing up against me like a bitch in heat, and now it’s gone. Where is that button?”

She tried to pull free but he was too strong. Her shoulder creaked, about to dislocate. Over his head she saw one of the statues that lined the street’s rooftops—a giant stone bull. Cloudies were busy chipping at its moorings. Jame must have asked them for a diversion to slow the mob. The bull stiffly tipped the six foot span of its horns toward the street below.

“Denish, look out...”

Too late. Here it came with a deadly rush, blotting out the moon. People in its shadow looked up and screamed, but they were too tightly packed to retreat. It shattered into the pavement, flinging lethal stone missiles. Patches fell, throwing an arm over her face, sure she was about to be smashed to red ruin.

Some time later she woke sick and dizzy, on top of a bed of sharp debris. All around her people groaned or screamed or lay all too still. Denish’s hand still gripped her wrist, but it was no longer attached to his body. That lay smashed under the bulk of the stone bull while his blood leaked out between the cobbles.

Down the street, she saw the prow of Ship Island backlit with flames. The palace was burning.

Thal’s balls, how long had she been unconscious? Long enough for the street to fill with black jacketed figures instead of blue, but they too were howling:

“The Sirdan is dead! The Talisman has killed him! You, girl, where has she gone?”

Hands grabbed her jacket and jerked her to her feet. Oh, her head! Could she possibly have phased through the flying debris as she had earlier through Denish’s pocket? Flesh to flesh as in Denish’s grip she had been helpless, but otherwise...

Ah, save that thought for later.

Jame, to have assassinated the Sirdan, though? She might, to avenge Dally, but surely not without knowing all the facts. It was her fault that Jame didn’t.

“Let me go!”

She twisted in the grip of her captors and suddenly was free despite their startled shouts. Where would Jame have gone? Quick, lead them in what she hoped was the opposite direction, back into the maze of streets. Let them follow if they could.

III

They chased her westward through the labyrinthine city, up lane and down alley, past shuttered shop windows and under narrow, leaning houses. She knew Taitastigon better after Jame’s tutelage than most of its inhabitants did, but not as well as the Talisman herself, which is why Patches suddenly found herself in a dead end before a locked door. Hunting cries echoed behind her. She could tell that this time, in their frustration, they were out for blood. When she pounded on the door, however, no one answered.

What would the Talisman have done? Climbed the wall? Picked the lock? Turned and fought? But she was only the Talisman’s Trinket, not the Talisman herself.

All right. Now or never to test what had happened when the stone bull had failed to crush her. Patches screwed her eyes shut and pushed at the door. Her hands first meet resistance, then one of them slipped through. Wood clamped over her sleeve like a vise. She fumbled desperately inside, feeling the lock, twisting it. The door swung open, taking her with it. The house’s occupants huddled against the far wall, staring at her wide eyed.

“Help,” she said, but they didn’t move.

Bracing herself, she pulled at her trapped hand. It slid backward up into the bunched sleeve, then into the room with the rip of cloth, leaving half of the coat trapped in the door. Mother was going to be furious, or at least as much so as she ever got.

Patches slammed and locked the door, leaving a neat, fabric fringed hole in the middle of it.

“Sorry,” she gasped at inmates. “Just passing through.”

Fists pounded on the outer panels and fingers groped through the hole. The family were piling furniture against the door as Patches staggered out the front of the house.

She was back on the edge of the now empty Square. No, not quite empty: someone different sat on the Mercy Seat. What was this, some cruel game of musical chairs?

Although taller and older than she, Dally had seemed small there, like an abandoned, broken doll. He who occupied the stone chair now lounged like a tattered king. They hadn’t stripped off his black *d’hen*, but it had been cut to fluttering ribbons. The skin beneath glistened with the blood that still flowed sluggishly from too many wounds to count. From there it trickled down to pool on the flagstones. While the flies still buzzed over it in a swirling cloud, however, none landed to touch.

A white face framed in black hair turned toward her and smiled, horribly. For a moment she thought that it was Jame. Although the lines of the cheekbones and jaw were familiar, they were also heavier. Oh gods. Bane.

He laughed, a terrible, wheezing sound. "Are you amused, little thief? Was it your friends who did this to me?"

Patches gulped. "Not mine. Not the Talisman's. How many?"

"Two dozen. Three. None stuck less than once, some many times. Of all the children with whom I have played, that I should die for one who never felt my touch..."

"You didn't flay Dally?"

He snorted. Blood trickled out of his nostrils. "Of course not. Jame would have killed me. What she saw in that pretty poppet, though... innocence, perhaps. Dally never hurt anyone except once, when a little thiefling tried to assassinate his precious brother."

Patches remembered Dally's face and voice the last time he had visited Jame after the election, when she had spied on them.

"I never killed anyone before," he had said, looking sick. "I didn't like it."

At the time, she had thought him weak and whining.

Bane's silvery eyes slid sideways toward her and his mouth twisted. "Yes, innocence. Such a heady lure. Are you innocent too, little hobgoblin? Yes, I can smell it on you despite your blood, like Dally, like Jame, although her state is more complex. Innocent but not ignorant, oh yes." He laughed again, weakly, wheezing from punctured lungs. "Not so I, ignorant but not innocent, the worst of both worlds."

Despite herself, Patches drew nearer. After the attentions of Men-dalis's followers, the man was clearly a sieve all but drained of blood. "Why aren't you dead?"

"A Kencyr dies hard. One without his soul dies hardest of all."

She hadn't known that he was Kencyr although perhaps she should have guessed. He and Jame really were much alike in their dark glamour. As for his soul, she could see that for herself now that she looked, for even in that moon-bright square he cast no shadow.

"Honor," he groaned. "Honor is all. Seven years ago I gave my soul in trust to the Kencyr priest Ishtier to preserve it. He has it still and while he does, I can not die. Tell him, little thief. Tell him to let it go and me with it."

Patches thought of her six younger siblings—none of them to Bane's taste, perhaps, but he had flayed many more alive before the Talisman's purity had caught his interest. He was a monster who deserved worse than this, and yet... and yet...

"Jame loves you," she blurted out, hearing her own resentment.

He laughed, a horrible, wet, tearing sound. "Close."

"All right. She hates you."

"Closer. We are of one blood, she and I. Help me or not, then, but if so, do it for her sake and your own. They will be after her and all of her friends now to serve as scapegoats for the Sirdan's death."

A tremor ran through the air, through the ground. Buildings swayed. Farther away, some fell. With a grinding as if of teeth, a crack edged out into the square.

Patches had been thrown to her knees on the flags. “What is it?” she gasped.

“Can’t you feel it? At last someone has really annoyed our Talisman.”

To the north, toward the Temple District, lights bloomed out of the dense, crazy quilt of streets followed by more concussions and a chorus of strange, discordant cries. The crack grated closer, as if something were prying open the flags’ stony lips.

Patches felt her brain swell against the walls of her skull. So much power...

She lurched to her feet. “This has something to do with the Talisman, all right. The weirdest shit always does. But what and why?”

He was panting now, straining more to die than to live. “Shall I... tell you... a story? The Sirdan sent me to steal... a certain Book Bound in Pale Leather... from Jame. I did. It probably killed him. I assume that now she has given it to that fool Ishtier...”

“Why? She hates him!”

“Because her friend Marc caught her in the temple of Abarraden... but let her go... when he realized who she was. He thinks... he has forsworn his oath as a guard and so... has lost his honor. The only way... to get it back is through... an honorable death. So he has put himself into Ishtier’s hands.”

“But the Eye is only glass. The period of jeopardy for any thief will be over by now. He’s as safe as the Talisman is.”

“Ishtier won’t care about that. He only lusts... after power.”

The ground shuddered again. Orange light flooded out between the surrounding houses and moved, casting brilliant, flickering bars, down an adjacent street. It was headed southward, toward the Lower Town. All in its wake burned.

“My family...!”

“Go... to them. I am... dead meat. I hope.”

As she reached the edge of the square, Patches looked back. With a mighty gnashing of stone teeth, the crack had reached its center, and swallowed the Mercy Seat whole.

As she ran, the city came alive around her. Strange shadows flitted from eave to eave. Lights burst from cracks. Monstrous forms lurched around corners, and fled when they saw her. Some gave chase for a block or two wailing “Worship me, worship me!” Others huddled in corners chattering in terror. It was clear to her what had happened: With that burst of power, all the gods had outgrown their temples and were finding themselves, for the first time in their immortal lives, cast out on the streets.

Patches kept pace with the blazing light, one street over. Seen directly as it passed intersections, it dazzled the eyes, but glimpsed askance it resolved itself into giant, fiery wheels rolling on and on. Dally had once taken her and Jame to meet his divine step-father. Not that one could see much in the temple because of the light—all the priests there had long since been stricken blind—but she now recognized Dalis-sar’s sun chariot. More and more, the current situation seemed to relate to the Kencyr, if not entirely: following the chariot came a small, dark cloud and in it a hopping green form: Gorgo, formerly the Lugubrious, bringing with him his own miniature rain storm to quench the terrible fire that went before him.

Seeing where they were, Patches sprinted ahead. North of the Lower Town lay the ring of desolation that surrounded the Kencyr temple, oldest and most shunned in the city. Given its effects on the neighboring architecture, most of which had been reduced to rubble, no wonder the formal Temple district had chosen to establish itself somewhere else.

Waves of power emanated from it, causing dust to ripple on the road and Patches' short hair to bristle like a hedgehog's. She could sense that this was the epicenter of the recent earthquake and the subsequent untempling of the gods. No doubt the Talisman had had something to do with that too. The image rose in her mind of Jame dancing at the Res AB'tyrr, all but seducing her audience and controlling the complex emotions that she herself provoked. Tonight must have been a mighty dance indeed, to channel the power of a god.

There was the temple, tall, black, stark, more like a work of nature than of man. Its door opened and Jame emerged. She ran toward Patches—no, toward the corner around which Dalis-sar's flames were just beginning to lick.

Patches waved her arms. "No!" she tried to shout, and heard her voice emerge in a dust-choked croak. "Stop!"

Here came the fiery chariot, and all around it everything burned.

Jame's voice soared over the holocaust: "Bane! It's name is Bane!"

The blazing wheels rolled past, leaving a huddled figure in its wake. A big man, Marc, knelt beside the Talisman beating out the flames that Gorgo's rain had failed to extinguish.

Patches wanted to go to her, not to see if she was all right—in the end, Jame always was—but just to say hello, or good-bye, or thank you. Whatever else happened, she had the aching sense that this was the Talisman's last night in Taitastigon.

Marc helped Jame up. They were going. Time Patches was gone too, after the flaming warrior, toward the ruins of the Lower Town where her family awaited her, by the shortest route possible.

IV

Once the Lower Town had been like any other district of the city, if poorer than most. Patches remembered the shabby, bustling streets, the cries of peddlers, workmen, and mothers gathering in their broods for the evening meal. That was before the Lower Town Monster had come to hunt the midnight lanes, to follow the stifled cries of children as they hid beneath their covers. Had that only been seven years ago? Scramp had already run away, eventually to worm his way into the Thieves' Guild. He had never come back. Patches did whenever she could, bringing whatever trifles her master allowed her to keep to trade for food or sometimes for a toy, with which her six younger sibling solemnly played, each in turn.

There was the house now, the last one occupied on its particular street.

"Ma!" she called, opening the door into a dark room.

Steel struck flint and a candle flared.

Half a dozen men in royal blue *d'hens* waited for her.

Too late to run. Besides, there were her brothers and sisters lined up against the back wall, so alike in their wizened features that only age and height served to distinguish them. She could have joined the head of that line without breaking it. Her mother stood before them, expressionless as usual, her hands clasped tightly in front of her spotless apron, her silver wedding ring glimmering in the half-light.

“What do you want?” Patches demanded, trying not to squeak.

“Need you ask?” The man with the flint tucked it back into his pocket. She recognized him as one of Men-dalis’s intelligence agents, Senci by name. “Why, the Talisman, of course. Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Patches lied, or was it the truth? She had no definite idea where Jame had gone, but she could guess. Surely these men could too. Even now, were others of their number visiting the Res AB’tyrr? “I know why Theocandi’s folk are after her, but why are you?”

“And they said that you were clever. The Talisman’s Trinket indeed. We can’t have people assassinating our guild lords, now, can we? As the new Sirdan, m’lord Men-dalis takes a dim view of such a precedent.”

Patches unobtrusively signaled to her siblings. They left the wall, each to choose a man and to stand staring up at him with wide, blank eyes. The thieves seemed to find this disconcerting, especially the one faced with the baby, who sat on his foot and wrapped its arms around his leg.

“Get off,” he hissed at it, but subsided, embarrassed, as the others turned, briefly, to regard him.

Patches returned to Senci. “Has there been a new election?”

“We needn’t bother with that. Who else is there, after all, to fill the office? There will be time, when things settle down, to revisit such niceties.”

Patches felt oddly disconcerted. She hadn’t chosen a side in the past election anymore than Jame had, neither of them having seen any reason to favor one candidate over the other. For her, politics had always been someone else’s business. To be excluded from them altogether, though...

“You want to distract the guild,” she said. “Bane was right: You want a scapegoat.”

Just then the door creaked open, making everyone start. The figure on the threshold was black-robed and small, but instantly recognizable as Men-dalis’s master spy, the Creeper.

“It’s coming,” he said in his hoarse whisper.

Senci rose, knocking over his chair. The others stirred and murmured uneasily. “Er... what’s coming?” asked one.

Patches moved to stand by her mother. She found that her knees were shaking. “If you lived in the Lower Town, you would know.”

“Oh. That. Er... run?”

As children dodged out of their way, the intruders scrambled out the door, Senci first among them.

Patches found herself standing on the threshold beside the Creeper. Only children need fear the Lower Town Monster, she told herself, and she was no longer a child; but her siblings were. She closed the door. Inside, a bar dropped across the frame and the light went out.

The street stretched north and south before her, lined with abandoned, decaying houses, washed with silvery moonlight. Patches felt her heart pounding in her throat. The Monster had been the bogeyman of her childhood.

“If you don’t behave,” mothers had warned their babies for generations, “it will come and gobble up your soul.”

That had only been a story when she was younger, but then children had started to disappear—more and more of them—until the Lower Tower was a ghost quarter. And still Patches had never seen the thing itself.

She did now. It crawled toward her down the street like a prone shadow. Long, tenebrous fingers groped ahead of it, catching in the cracks between the cobblestones, pulling it forward. Others probed in passing at shuttered windows and traced the edges of barred doors. It seemed to lie flat to the ground until it raised its head. Black, featureless, unearthly, it fixed its attention on Patches. Maybe she wasn’t as grown up as she had thought. It crept toward her, and the stones limned with frost at its touch. Patches cringed back against the door. If she pounded on it now, would her mother let her in? No, not with six other offspring to protect.

Then it hesitated.

Light flared behind it as fiery wheels rolled around the corner. It sank into a black pool and waited. On came Dalis-sar’s chariot, in a storm of flame and swirling ash. Tongues of fire leaped from roof to roof as it advanced until the very air seemed to burn. The wheels reached the shadow and sank into it between cobblestones which shattered at the sudden change of temperature. The charioteer bellowed with rage. His flaming whip lashed at the shadows that crept up the sides of his vehicle, lacing them with frost.

“To kill a demon,” the Creeper whispered in Patches’ ear, “you need fire, water, and its true name.”

Who or what was the Lower Town Monster? If a demon, that implied a detached soul, one who preyed on children. What predator had lost his soul some seven years ago?

Patches found herself running toward the struggling chaos of fire and shadow. “It’s name is Bane!” she shouted at the charioteer, as Jame had before her. “Bane!”

The shadows were melting. Back they sank between the stones, into the ground, with the ghost of a wail. In their wake, everything burned, and then came rain. Gorgo hopped about the street in a victory dance, little claps of thunder and lightning clashing over his green head, sizzling on the flaming wheels, on the shoulders of the man who stood on the smoldering platform, drooping with fatigue.

“Well done, little sister,” he said to Patches with a tired smile, then faded into a shining ghost, into a memory. Moonlight flooded the broken street in his wake.

Patches could feel it: all over the city, the gods were shrinking as they expended their power enough to fit back into their temples. Most went with profound relief.

The Creeper touched her shoulder. She recoiled from him. Half seen in the shadow of his hood, his face was as prematurely wrinkled as her own, his stature as dwarfish. And he stank, like bad dreams and old blood.

Here was the true bogeyman, Patches thought, Dalis-sar's shadow and dark genius. Would anything that had happened tonight have happened without him? But it was partly her fault too.

"I didn't tell Jame that I saw you and Men-dalis meet Dally the night of the election and take him away. I didn't lie to her, but I didn't tell her the whole truth either."

"Daughter..."

"Leave me alone! I thought, *Good: He's going back to the fortress, to his own kind.* She was too good for him anyway. I thought you would keep him safe. But you didn't. You killed him in Bane's style to start a guild war. Why, damn you?"

"We caught him sneaking back from her. Men-dalis believed that his brother had betrayed him to Theocandi through her and so lost him the election."

"Because you told him so! I didn't like Dally, but he was never disloyal. And Jame couldn't care less about politics. You're the Creeper, the spy masters' master. You know that. You just wanted a war to overthrow the election, didn't you?"

The hooded shoulders shrugged.

"All politics are war. All wars have casualties."

* * * * *

"Dally, Bane, Theocandi, even Jame if you can catch her. Well, she's too good for you too, you... you filthy bogle!"

And she punched him in the nose.

Or tried to.

Her fist sank into the cowl and tangled there in fusty cloth. The cloak clung to her fold on fold as if it were trying to swallow her. In it she felt something small, round, and hard. Without thinking, she grabbed it. The cloak flew up in her face, over her head, but she fought it off. In an instant, it withdrew and fled, again draping a dwarfish form, down the street and away.

Patches looked at what she had seized. It was a plain silver ring, identical to her mother's.

V

At the Res AB'tyrr she found six thieves' guildsmen, all unconscious, and Marc's fellow guard, Sart Nine-toes.

"Came looking for the lass, they did," he explained, cracking his knuckles. "I settled for them... well, we did."

The Widow Cleppetania put down the frying pan she had snatched up on Patches's precipitous entrance. The rest of the inn's servants peered cautiously out of the kitchen, as if unsure where cutlery would be flying next.

"If you're looking for them too," she said, "they've gone. The city being what it is tonight and is likely to be in the foreseeable future, it seemed wisest."

Patches hopped from foot to foot. All night she had been a step behind Jame. "Gone where?"

“Out the western gate, bound to cross the Ebonbane for the Central Lands. Jame said something about going home.”

“But the high passes aren’t open yet!”

“Try telling her that, and yet they’ll probably be safer there than here.”

Patches had to admit that Cleppetty was right as she scurried through the streets toward the western gate. Even this far from the temple district, fires still burned and shadows slunk from cover to cover. A wall hiccupped, having swallowed the adjacent house. The fin of a leviathan surfaced in a puddle.

As for the thieves, they would be out in force as soon as they realized that the Sirdan’s supposed assassin had left her usual haunts. Would Men-dalis be able to keep the power that he had seized? Might it even be better if he did? The city tottered on the edge of chaos. A strong hand might bring it back into balance – but the hand of a liar and a fratricide? Was this what the Creeper had meant by politics? Whatever happened, things would never be the same again.

Here was the western gate, standing open. Patches stopped on the threshold, panting and holding a savage stitch in her side. The road to the mountains stretched out before her like a silken ribbon. Not so far down it walked three figures, one very tall, one very short: Marc, Jame’s hunting cat Jorin, and between them, Jame herself.

Patches almost called out to them. They would hear. They could still turn and come back. But her voice caught in her throat.

...going home...

Jame had only, ever, been passing through. Her fate lay ahead, down the path that she had begun to trod tonight.

Patches’ home lay behind her, scarred as it was with fire, shadow, and boiling strife. That was the Talisman’s legacy, whatever she had meant, and it was the Trinket’s fate to cope with the mess that her mentor had left behind.

So it was. So it must be.

Patches stood watching until the three were beyond earshot, until she could hardly tell which was which.

“Good-bye,” she breathed at last, and turned to face her inheritance.

