

~ ONE ~

Vykers, In the Stocks

The beatings and abuse continued without pause, without end, due in no small part to the efforts of the two A'Shea on either side of him, who had surely foresworn their sacred trust in prolonging his misery. He had hoped for – even expected – death, by the end of his first day. But the Duke, the people of the Reaches and his healers would not be satisfied until the last victim had exacted his just measure of vengeance. An all-too familiar speech interrupted his reverie.

“You may strike him once,” one of the guards told the next in line, “however you like. If your blow's the one kills him, though, you'll be whipped on this same post. Do you understand?”

“Aye.”

Of course. They all understood; they were artists of understanding by now. And so he'd been punched, slapped, scratched, kicked, stabbed with needles in non-vital areas, spat upon, burned and had various things thrown on him, from rotten blood, to urine, feces, vomit and offal. He was a masterpiece of the people's understanding. And still, death would not come, nor the lines of peasants abate. He could endure the physical torture – what choice did he have? – but the constant insults and taunting were harder to ignore. He'd been a proud man. Once. Worse than the beatings and the verbal abuse, however, were the flies. There must, he concluded, have been one for each person he'd killed over the years. Perhaps these flies were even the shades of those unhappy dead, come back to join in the festivities. They made him itch something fierce. The only accidental mercy he enjoyed was that he'd been hung up facing west, and for the brief few minutes that sunset was in his eyes, he could see nothing.

But perhaps blindness had put him here in the first place.

One morning, he was awakened – shocking enough that he'd been asleep – with a crash of salt water, the cold of it practically stopping his heart, and the salt burning his countless wounds like hellfire. Miraculously, he found himself alone. Or nearly so.

“You look like shit, Vykers. Smell like it, too.” It was Captain Brandt again, backed by a number of silent soldiers. “Course, most of it probably *is* shit, but you get my meaning.”

The best the Reaper could manage was to grunt in reply.

“I guess we all thought you'd be dead by now.”

Vykers was silent this time. No need to respond to such an obvious truth.

“There's no good news, there, though. His Lordship says you're to live...after a fashion.”

Brandt was setting him up. Vykers wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"We're taking your feet and hands, Reaper, and then we're dumping you in the woods."

Vykers looked up, inquiringly.

Brandt shrugged. "His Lordship thinks there may come a day when someone will have need of your...talents. If you're still alive, that is."

Finally, Vykers spoke. "That's bad strategy."

"No shit. And I told him so. But he's convinced you'll be tractable." The captain reached over and unlocked the mechanism holding Vykers in place.

Slowly, the prisoner stood up.

"Enjoy it, Vykers. You won't be so tall in a few moments' time."

The odd sensation in his gut was fear, he realized. The first he'd felt in ages. He simply couldn't – or didn't want to – imagine life without hands or feet. His Lordship had finally accomplished what thousands of angry peasants could not: he had made Vykers feel something.

The actual taking of his hands and feet was more psychologically painful than physically so. The terror as the axe swooped down and parted his flesh was unlike anything he'd ever known. The pain was less significant, for a while. This time, the healers took no special care to sustain him, beyond cauterizing and wrapping his wounds. Watching them gather his hands and feet into a bucket and carry them off, Vykers felt unspeakable loss.

He spent the entire journey into the wilds in a semi-conscious fog, in the back of an old wagon that must once have been used to transport pickled herring. The smell and the rough jostling made him violently ill and, along with the weakness, fever and pain he was already feeling, he again found himself wishing, yearning, for death. This was immeasurably harder to endure than those days of beatings and insults in the public square. He almost laughed at the thought of it. Almost.

He must have lost consciousness, because the next thing he knew, he was crashing to the ground in a dark forest. The shadow of a fat man stood between him and the last of the day's light.

"See you in hell, Vykers."

"Oh, you'll be there, too?"

A moment of angry silence, and then Vykers felt a boot to his face. He might've lost a tooth. Another one. There was a bit of rustling, and then he felt hot liquid pouring onto his head.

Piss.

The fat man laughed.

Vykers shut him out and went back to sleep.

Aoife, On Her Mission

She had, she felt, spent most of her life second-guessing herself. Standing out of the rain under an old cedar by the side of the road, her mind circled back, inevitably, to the same conclusion: she should have killed him when she had the chance. And the same old retort tried to rescue her: how can a ten year old girl be expected to murder her little brother?

There was no way to answer these thoughts; she had tried for years. She was damned when he *became*.

She gasped. Sometimes, when she was wrapped up in these thoughts, she forgot to breathe. Or was that self-sabotage? Anyway, she sighed, shouldered her pack and set off again, hoping to make the next village by nightfall. A fire would be heavenly. And something to eat, something hot. She wouldn't be picky.

Of course, she felt guilt as she noticed the telltale scars of war on the landscape. But it had been a while. Maybe things were on the mend locally, and folks had begun to forget. Until he returned.

Gods, it was driving her mad. She needed to visit an herbalist. More than fire or food, she hoped the nearest settlement had an herbalist, even a hedge witch would do. She had to quell these nagging recriminations or she would lose her mind.

"Blessings, Sister. Walk with you?"

She turned. A withered old man in tattered clothing hobbled towards her.

"Best to have comp'ny along these roads, nowadays."

"Certainly, friend, certainly, and welcome."

Welcome, indeed. Anything, anyone to wrench her mind from its present self-abuse.

"Spreading the word, then, are you?" the old man asked.

"That's been done, I think." She responded. "I'm more for ministering to the sick."

He laughed. “Plenty of work for you in town, then. No shortage.”

“And you? What brings you onto the road at this hour?”

“Was told there was a Mender approaching, and I came out searching, to be your escort-like.”

“But wouldn’t they send the –“

“I *am* the Captain of the Guard.”

That stopped her in her tracks.

The old man shrugged, apologetically. “Times ain’t what they ought to be.”

Everything, everything made her feel guilty.

“What’s the population of your town, sir? Captain?”

“Thousand, give or take.”

“And how many men amongst you?”

“Of shaving and sword-bearing age? Maybe sixty.”

She reeled. “But sixty?”

“Oh, there be a couple hundred boys, surely. But we’re letting ‘em *be* boys, for the nonce. All the rest –“

“Yes, I know, Captain,” she said, a little more sharply than she’d intended, “the wars have been evil, inexcusably, unforgivably evil.”

“That they have” was all he said before falling silent.

Up ahead, she saw the silhouettes of cottages in the gloom.

Vykers, In the Forest

Vykers woke up with dirt in his eyes. It took him a moment, but he dimly remembered crawling into an old log at some point. He was more thirsty than he’d ever been in his life, even more than in his various campaigns across numerous deserts, even more than during his recent days-long torture in the square of that nameless village. Thirst was a demon inside him. He felt that if he didn’t get water in the next few minutes, he’d be dead within the hour.

He tried to move and was blindsided by an avalanche of pain. That's right: they'd destroyed him, taken his hands and feet. The stumps were itching and burning and throbbing all at once. It was by sheer force of will that he clung to consciousness and sanity. Water, first. Nothing else mattered.

Slowly, he inched his way out of the log and into the light of afternoon In the Forest. Questions were a swarm of bees in his head, but water first. Water first. What did he know about water? It flowed downhill. It was most likely to be found in the low places, in the gullies and ravines. He listened, but could hear only insects and birds. They knew where the water was, but wouldn't tell him, the little bastards. He raised his head and looked around. This was an old, old forest in a temperate climate. There were oaks and firs, alder and birch. The undergrowth was all but impassible. There would be water.

He had a powerful urge to sleep, but felt that if did, he would never wake up. Water first.

There was no obvious slope nearby, but he began crawling in the direction that most felt downhill. After an eternity of unrelenting effort and agony, he found himself looking down into the urine-filled tracks of a hooved animal. He sniffed the liquid and almost threw up. But he bent his lips to the tracks and drank, anyway, and indeed had a very hard time keeping it down. His disgust and anger gave him a burst of energy, though. He considered a moment: was this beast coming from or heading towards water? Coming from, he decided and wriggled off in the direction from which it came. He almost burst into tears when, after a great deal of time, he came within sight of a bog.

With frantic energy, he shuffled into the water, almost completely submerging himself. It was not particularly cold and had a deep, woody flavor, but he didn't care. It was the most wonderful thing he had ever tasted. When he was satisfied, he crawled back onto dry land, exhausted. Again, he needed a safe place to sleep. He was ravenous, he was cold, but of all his basic needs, sleep was most demanding. Eventually, he found a dense thicket that backed up against a large boulder. He would be unreachable from behind and difficult to reach from the front. It was not perfect – nowhere near – but good enough.

He slept like a dead man.

Long Pete & Company, In Corners

Long Pete was a gigolo. He had been a lousy farmer, an inept fisherman, a hopeless blacksmith's apprentice and a middling soldier. In the dearth of men after the wars, he became very popular with the local womenfolk. Well, perhaps "very popular" was overdoing it. He became *necessary*, and that was good enough for him. That he could pleasure himself and a woman and make money at the same time was more than he had ever hoped for. Still, he couldn't escape the feeling that he ought to be doing something, when he wasn't doing *someone*. And the other men in town weren't exactly fond of him. What he wanted – what he needed – was a higher calling, some way to earn their respect and eternal gratitude. There had once been a

statue in the town square, some honorable so-and-so, but the locals had been forced to smelt it down for swords, armor and arrowheads during the war. But they couldn't do that to the statue Long Pete hoped to have someday, if it were made of marble.

"Ho there, Pete!" Long Pete was shaken from his daydream by the voice of his too-constant companion, Janks. At his side was their friend, Short Pete, wheeling himself along in his specially made cart. Short Pete, whose real name was "Frayne," had lost both legs in battle, but not his sense of humor. If Long Pete was somewhat vain, the existence of a Short Pete would surely temper him.

"Shall we make merry this morning?" Janks bellowed.

"I'm a bit the worse for wear after last night's...celebrations, and I've work to do later."

"Work, is it? Work! I should be so lucky!" Short Pete replied. The fact was that, while Long Pete was tall and somewhat chicken-like, and Janks resembled nothing so much as a pig, Short Pete would have been a fine specimen, indeed, if not for the lack of legs.

"Lucky? I'd trade it all in a heartbeat for a title and a piece of land. Some of these women are impossibly demanding. The great Mahnus himself couldn't please them."

"Well, they do say he had two peckers." Janks offered.

"I'd rather have kept that image out of my head all day" said Short Pete. "But you couldn't work a bit of land to save yourself."

"I didn't say anything about working it. I just want a buffer to keep the riffraff out."

"But you *are* the riffraff!" Short Pete objected.

Long Pete choked. "With friends like you..."

"Got anything to drink about you?" Janks asked.

Long Pete sighed and pulled a flask from his vest. "Go easy on that, Janks. I won't be able to refill it 'til I see the widow Sorensen tomorrow night. Anyway, why don't you go over to the inn and drink your fill there?"

"I..." Janks began.

"He's got no credit left. Owes Arnet too much money." Short Pete said.

"It's true, it's true, and a terrible thing it is when honest men can't earn a decent wage." Janks lamented.

“Honest men?” Long Pete sneered. “Where? And why should the indecent earn a decent wage?”

“A man’s gotta do something for money, hasn’t he? Look at you!”

“I happen to perform a valuable service!”

“For yourself, maybe. I doubt all them widows’d miss you if you went off to war again.”

Long Pete was indignant. “For your information, mate...”

“Ladies! Ladies!” Short Pete interjected, “This is boredom talking. What we need is some sort of cause, or purpose. We can’t sit here drinking and whoring forever.”

“They’re not whores!”

“You know what I mean, Long. We don’t have any goals. You want that title and piece of land, you’ll have to earn it.”

There was a long silence and then Janks said “I might have an idea...”

Vykers, In the Forest

When he had been whole, he had not been given to reflection; he took, he broke, he killed. Now, though, he had little to do but reflect. And he did not enjoy it. Memories of things he did – or even might have done – bedeviled him. Questions of why and what-for tormented him. Had he been given life only to take others’ lives? What was his purpose now? Why was he even alive? *Countless Hells*, he hated these thoughts; they were the province of weak-spirited philosophers. If he had his way, he’d...but he did not have his way and likely never would again. He’d been reduced, he felt, to his primal state, that of a beast. He lived in squalor, ate whatever came within reach, slept, pissed. He’d long since lost his use for language – who was there to talk to? Ha! Was this so different from his former life, after all? Except for the thinking.

Without cause or warning, he remembered a particular battle a few years earlier. His army had swept into some backwater and pitched camp. Facing annihilation, the locals sent their beloved champion to challenge Vykers in single combat. The man was a legend among his people, with a near-mythical sword. He was tall, he was handsome, with the kind of charisma most only dream about. With a great, jubilant roar, they sent him forward. Vykers cut him down before he could even draw that sword from its sheath, and then broke it over his knee. The silence that followed was deafening. The hope and courage went out of the opposing army in a single breath, and they went to their deaths with little resistance. It was as if, in killing their hero, he had killed an entire people. The rest was just clean-up.

Vykers had never meant that much to anyone. He was universally feared, to be sure, but no one admired him. And no one missed him now, he was certain. But he would not wallow in self-pity. That, too, was for lesser men. He – Something...something was scrabbling in the back of his mind, like a rat in the walls. For a moment, he considered resisting. Then he realized the only way to catch this rat was to let it into the room.

“Warrior...”

Vykers was on all-fours, foraging in a gully. He paused.

“A moment of your time...”

He raised his head, held his breath, looked around. No one. This was something internal.

“Warrior.”

He laughed. He was going mad. He’d figured it might happen, sooner or later.

“I am here.”

Vykers looked around and noticed a pale root or stick under his left knee. Moving off it, he saw several more nearby. Not sticks. Bones. And there, between two stones, a skull. He scuttled towards it, laughed again. “Vykers, old man, you have well and truly gone ‘round the bend!”

“Not so,” the voice replied.

He dug the skull out with his wrists. The back was missing.

“I met my end here, yes.”

Vykers sat back on his haunches, contemplating the skull.

“Will you not speak to me?”

“Why are *you* talking to *me*?”

“Because you’re here. And I’ve been waiting too long for someone, anyone, to come by.”

“And then...?”

“Take me away.”

“You’re out of luck,” Vykers said. “I’ve got no hands and no use for your bones, if I did.”

“But *I* may be of use to you.”

This time, Vykers laughed himself faint. “Who are you?” he asked. “Who *were* you?”

“I was – am -- Fourth Shaper to his Majesty, King Orstoth.”

Vykers sat. “Was. He’s dead, too.”

The voice was silent.

“So, you’re one of them Burners, huh?”

“We prefer ‘Shapers.’”

Vykers laughed. “And I’d *prefer* to have my hands again, but what we want’s got nothing to do with what’s coming to us. What’s your name, Burner?”

“I was called ‘Arune.’”

“Huh. Never heard of you.”

“And your name is Tarmun Vykers.”

“Maybe you *were* a mage.”

“Vykers-the-Vicious,’ they call you, and ‘the Reaper.’”

“I doubt they call me anything, anymore. Far as anyone knows, I’m dead. How’d *you* die, anyway?”

“Long Teeth.”

“Svarren?”

“That’s an older name for them, aye.” Arune said. They’re also variously known as Svarrenii, Worrenu, and Varn. “I’m surprised you haven’t encountered them hereabouts.”

Vykers’ head snapped up; he scanned the forest.

“I told you you weren’t mad. A madman wouldn’t care for his own safety.”

“It’s just that I hate those fucking things. And I’d hate to be set upon when I’m defenseless.”

Now, it was the shade’s turn to laugh. “The Reaper, defenseless? You underestimate yourself.”

“I have no hands or feet, fool. I can’t run from predators nor defend myself once they catch me.”

“Take me with you, then. I can help.”

Vykers glanced at the skull in irritation. “Assuming I haven’t gone completely batshit, and you are more than you seem, how can you help?”

“Take me with you, and I’ll show you.”

“You’re getting on my nerves, Boney. What the hell difference does it make if you lie here or in my cave for all eternity?”

“We won’t be staying in your cave for all eternity, as you put it.”

Vykers brooded.

“I offer you fire,” the ghost said.

Vykers grinned, in spite of himself. “Fire? You can give me fire?”

“What sort of Shaper would I be if I couldn’t conjure fire?”

“Yeah, but you’re dead.”

“For now.”

“Okay,” Vykers shrugged. “Let’s go back to my cave...”