

Glen Cook - Raker

Glen Cook ("Call for the Dead," July 1980) returns with an inventive and powerful fantasy about the men of The Black Company. Mr. Cook's most recent book is STARFISHERS (Warner Books).

Raker

BY GLEN COOK

I

The wind tumbled and bumbled and howled around Meystrikt. Arctic imps giggled and blew their frigid breath through chinks in the walls of my quarters. My lamplight flickered and danced, barely surviving. When my fingers stiffened, I folded them round the flame and let them toast.

The wind was a hard blow out of the north, gritty with powder snow. A foot had fallen during the night. More was coming. It would bring more misery with it. I pitied Elmo and his gang. They were out Rebel hunting.

Meystrikt Fortress. Pearl of the Salient defenses. Frozen in winter. Swampy in spring. An oven in summer. White Rose prophets and Rebel mainforcers were the least of our troubles.

The Salient is a long arrowhead of flatland pointing south, between mountain ranges. Meystrikt lies at its point. It funnels weather and enemies down onto the stronghold. Our assignment is to hold this anchor of the Lady's northern defenses. Why the Black Company? We are the best. The Rebel infection began seeping through the Salient after the fall of Forsberg. The Limper tried to stop it and failed. The Lady sent us to clean up the Limper's mess. Her only other option was to abandon another province.

She endured too many retreats before our coming. She meant the Salient to mark their end.

The gate watch sounded a trumpet. Elmo was coming in.

There was no rush to greet him. The rules call for casualness, for a pretense that your guts are not churning with dread. Instead, men peeped from hidden places, wondering about brothers who had gone a-hunting. Anybody lost? Anyone bad hurt? You knew them better than kin. You'd fought side by side for years. Not all of them were friends, but they were family. The only family you had.

In its heyday, three centuries ago, the Company was 6000 strong. The Annals glow with the glory of those years, when our predecessors served the lords of Hellon. Nowadays my pitiful pages emanate bleakness. We number a mere 189. Time and fate have not served us well.

The gatemen hammered ice off the windlass. Shrieking its protests, the battered portcullis rose. As Company historian, I could go greet Elmo without violating the unwritten rules. Fool that I am, I went out into the wind and chill.

A sorry lot of shadows loomed through the blowing snow. The ponies were dragging. Their riders slumped over icy manes. Animals and men hunched into themselves, trying to escape the wind's scratching talons. Clouds of breath smoked from mounts and men, and were ripped away. This, in painting form, would have made a snowman shiver.

Of the whole Company only Raven ever saw snow before this winter. Some welcome to service with the

Lady.

The riders came closer. They looked more like refugees than brothers of the Black Company. Ice-diamonds twinkled in Elmo's mustache. Rags concealed the rest of his face. The others were so bundled I could not tell who was who. Only Silent rode resolutely tall. He peered straight ahead, disdaining that pitiless wind.

Elmo nodded as he came through the gate. "We'd started to wonder," I said. Wonder means worry. The rules demand a show of indifference.

"Hard traveling." Elmo does not talk much.

"How'd it go?"

"Black Company twenty-three, Rebel zip. No work for you, Croaker, except Jo-Jo has a little frostbite."

"You get Raker?"

Raker is an old, old enemy of the Lady, a luminary of the Rebel Circle of Eighteen. His dire prophecies, skilled witchcraft, and battlefield cunning cost the Lady her province of Forsberg. Then he came to the Salient and made a fool of the Limper. Another collapse appeared imminent. At winter's commencement the Lady sent us to replace that nastiest of the Taken. The move sent shock waves through the empire. A mercenary captain had been assigned forces and powers usually reserved for one of the Ten!

Salient winter being what it was, only a shot at Raker himself made the Captain field this patrol.

Elmo bared his face and grinned. He was not talking. He'd just have to tell it again for the Captain.

I considered Silent. No smile on his long, dreary face. He responded with a slight jerk of his head. So. Another victory that amounted to failure. Raker had escaped again. Maybe he would send us scampering after the Limper, squeaking mice who had grown too bold and challenged the cat.

Still, chopping twenty-three men out of the regional Rebel hierarchy counted for something. Not a bad day's work, in fact. Better than any the Limper turned in.

Men came for the patrol's ponies. Others set out mulled wine and warm food in the main hall. I stuck with Elmo and Silent. Their tale would get told soon enough.

After twelve years I am patient with Elmo. He is our finest platoon leader. We like each other. I rate him a close friend.

II

Meystrikt's main hall is only slightly less draughty than its quarters. I treated Jo-Jo. The others attacked their meals. Feast complete, Elmo, Silent, One-Eye, and Knuckles convened round a small table. Cards materialized. One-Eye scowled my way. "Going to stand there with your thumb in your butt, Croaker? We need a mark."

One-Eye is a wizened little black man with a volcanic temper and mouth to watch. He is at least a hundred years old. The Annals mention him throughout the past century. There is no telling when he joined. Seventy years' worth of Annals were lost when the Company's positions were overrun at the

Battle of Urban. One-Eye refuses to illuminate the missing years. He says he doesn't believe in history.

Elmo dealt. Five cards to each player and a hand to an empty chair. "Croaker!" One-Eye snapped. "You going to squat?"

"Nope. Sooner or later Elmo is going to talk." I tapped my pen against my teeth.

One-Eye was in rare form. Smoke poured out of his ears. A screaming bat popped out of his mouth. He likes his tricks.

"He seems annoyed," I observed. The others grinned. Baiting One-Eye is a favorite pastime.

One-Eye hates field work. And hates missing out even more. Elmo's grins and Silent's benevolent glances convinced him he'd missed something good.

Elmo redistributed his cards, peered at them from inches away. Silent's eyes glittered. No doubt about it. They had a special surprise.

Raven took the seat they'd offered me. No one objected. Even One-Eye seldom objects to anything Raven decides to do.

Raven. Colder than our weather. A dead soul, maybe. He can make a man shudder with a glance. Even the Taken, except the Limper, do not effect me that way. Soulcatcher is warmer.

The aura of the man cannot be conveyed. He exudes a stench of the grave. Yours, if you cross him.

He never smiles. Says maybe one word a month more than Silent. Mysterious and spooky. And yet... And yet there's Darling, his shadow, nine or ten, whom he salvaged from the ruins of a village the Limper burned. Darling loves him. Frail, pale, ethereal, she kept one little hand on his shoulder while he ordered his cards. She smiled for him.

Raven is an asset in any game including One-Eye. One-Eye cheats. But never when Raven is playing.

Nobody messes with Raven.

"She stands in the Tower, gazing northward. Her delicate hands are clasped before Her. A breeze steals softly through Her window. It stirs the midnight silk of Her hair. Tear diamonds sparkle on the gentle curve of Her cheek."

"Hoo-wee!"

"Oh, wow!"

"Author! Author!"

"May a sow litter in your bedroll, Willie." Those characters got a howl out of my fantasies about the Lady.

The sketches are a game I play with myself. Hell, for all they know, my inventions might be on the mark. Only the Ten Who Were Taken ever see the Lady. Who knows if She is beautiful, ugly, or what?

"Tear diamonds sparkling, eh?" One-Eye said. "I like that. Figure she's pining for you, Croaker?"

"Knock it off. I don't make fun of your games."

The Lieutenant entered, seated himself, regarded us with a black scowl. His mission in life is to disapprove.

His advent meant the Captain was on his way. Elmo folded his hand, composed himself.

The place fell silent. Men appeared as if by magic. "Bar the damned door!" One-Eye muttered. "They keep stumbling in like this, I'll freeze my ass off. Play the hand out, Elmo."

The Captain came in. He is short, dark, has hard eyes, and radiates the self-confidence of a man accustomed to instant obedience. He took his usual seat. "Let's hear it, Sergeant." Nobody else calls Elmo "Sergeant."

The Captain is not one of our more colorful characters. Too quiet. Too serious. Too seldom seen. Nevertheless, he is a competent tactician and brilliant manager of men. He compares commanding the Company to running a zoo. He is the only one of us Raven takes seriously.

Elmo laid his cards down, tapped their edges into alignment, ordered his thoughts. He is obsessed with brevity and precision.

"Sergeant?"

"Silent spotted a picket line south of the farm, Captain. We circled north. Attacked after sunset. They tried to scatter. Silent distracted Raker while we handled the others. Thirty men. We got twenty-three. We yelled a lot about not letting our spy get hurt. We missed Raker."

Sneaky makes this outfit work. We want the Rebel to believe his ranks are shot with informers. That hamstring his communications and decision-making, and makes life less chancy for Silent, One-Eye, and Goblin, our clutch of second-rate wizards.

The planted rumor. The small frame. The touch of bribery or blackmail. Those are our preferred weapons. We opt battle only when we have our opponents mouse-trapped.

"You returned directly to the fortress?"

"Yes, sir. After burning the farmhouse and outbuildings. Raker concealed his trail well."

The Captain considered the smoke-darkened beams overhead. Only One-Eye's snapping of his cards broke the silence. The Captain dropped his gaze. "Then, pray, why are you and Silent grinning like a pair of prize fools?"

One-Eye muttered, "Proud they came home empty-handed."

Elmo grinned. "But we didn't."

Silent dug inside his filthy shirt, produced the small leather bag that always hangs on a thong around his neck. His trick bag. It is filled with noxious oddments like putrefied bat's ears or elixir of nightmare. This time he produced a folded piece of paper. He cast dramatic glances at One-Eye and Goblin, opened the

packet fold by fold. Even the Captain left his seat, crowded the table.

"Behold!" said Elmo.

* * *

III

Tain't nothing but hair." Heads shook. Throats grumbled. Somebody questioned Elmo's grasp on reality. But One-Eye and Goblin had three big coweyes between them. One-Eye chirruped inarticulately. Goblin squeaked a few times, but, then, Goblin always squeaks. "It's really his?" he managed at last. "Really his?"

Elmo and Silent radiated the smugness of eminently successful conquistadors. "Absodamnlutely," Elmo said. "Right off the top of his bean. We had that old man by the balls and he knew it. He was heeling and toeing it out of there so fast he smacked his noggin on a doorframe. Saw it myself, and so did Silent. Left these on the beam. Whoo, that gaffer can step."

And Goblin, an octave above his usual rusty-hinge squeal, dancing in his excitement, said, "Gents, we've got him. He's as good as hanging on a meathook right now. The big one." He meowed at One-Eye. "What do you think of that, you sorry little spook?"

A herd of minuscule lightning bugs poured out of One-Eye's nostrils. Good soldiers all, they fell into formation, spelling out the words Goblin is a Poof. Their little wings hummed the words for the benefit of the illiterate.

There is no truth to that canard. Goblin is thoroughly heterosexual. One-Eye is a provocateur. In Goblin he has met his match, and for years they have pursued a hapless duel.

Goblin made a gesture. A great shadow-figure, like Soulcatcher but tall enough to brush the ceiling beams, bent and skewered One-Eye with an accusing finger. A sourceless voice whispered, "It was you that corrupted the lad, sodder."

One-Eye snorted, shook his head, shook his head and snorted. His eye glazed. Goblin giggled, stifled himself, giggled again. He spun away, danced a wild victory jig in front of the fireplace.

Our less intuitive brethren grumbled. A couple hairs. Big deal. With those and two bits silver you could get rolled by the village whores.

"Gentlemen!" The Captain understood.

The shadow-show ceased. The Captain considered his wizards. He thought. He paced. He nodded to himself. Finally, he asked, "One-Eye. Are they enough?"

One-Eye chuckled, an astonishingly deep sound for so small a man. "One hair, sir, or one nail paring, is enough. Sir, we have him."

Goblin continued his weird dance. Silent kept grinning. Raving lunatics, the lot of them.

The Captain thought some more. "We can't handle this ourselves." He circled the hall, his pace portentous. "We have to bring in one of the Taken."

Our most precious secret is the fact that we possess three sorcerers. They aren't great, but they make us effective where the odds look improbably long. The enemy can't find out. He would squander his resources, squash us like bugs.

One of the Taken. Cold stole in and froze us into statues. One of the Lady's shadow disciples.... one of those dark lords here? No....

"Not the Limper. He's got a hard-on for us."

"Shifter gives me the creeps." "Nightcrawler is worse." One-Eye said, "We can handle it, Captain."

"And Raker's cousins would be on you like flies on a horseapple. No."

"Soulcatcher," the Lieutenant suggested. "He is our patron, more or less."

The suggestion carried. Soulcatcher is a known quantity. He recruited us into the Lady's service. We don his death's-head badges when it serves the Captain's purpose.

The Captain said, "Contact him, One-Eye. Be ready to move when he gets here."

One-Eye nodded, grinned. He was in love. Already tricky, nasty plots were afoot in his twisted mind.

It should have been Silent's game, really. The Captain gave it to One-Eye because he cannot come to grips with Silent's refusal to talk. That scares him for some reason.

Silent did not protest.

Some of our native servants are spies. We know who they are, thanks to One-Eye and Goblin. One, who knew nothing about the hair, was allowed to flee with news that we were setting up an espionage headquarters in the free city Roses.

When you have the smaller battalions you learn guile.

IV

The Ten Who Were Taken. Four centuries ago a sorcerer consummate and cruel established suzerainty over an empire unrivaled before or since. He is remembered only as The Dominator, his era as The Domination, and his empire as either The Dominion or The Domination. His chief ally was his lover, the woman known then and now as the Lady, or Dark Lady. Their true names they obscured with admirable cunning and caution.

Their slaves-worshippers-captains, the Ten, were drawn from among the greatest of their vanquished and seduced opponents. They, too, obscured their true names during the long-ago wars of liberation. They became Nightcrawler, Stormbringer, the Howler, and so on. In the end, the Dominator was surrounded in the northern forests and overwhelmed. He and his champions were buried alive in a barrow complex subsequently guarded by every spell of confinement known.

Before he fell, the Dominator prophesied his own resurrection.

Centuries slid away. Some tinkering fool cracked the spells. That which had slept awakened. Graves

opened. The Taken arose. The Lady rose with them - but the Dominator did not. She had tricked him at their fall, and placed herself supreme.

So. A new empire came into being. In time, Soulcatcher enlisted the Black Company to fight the Lady's battles.

Every ruler makes enemies. The Lady is no exception. Her greatest are the Sons of the White Rose, or White Prophets, who claim spiritual and philosophical descent from the White Rose, the she-general who brought the Dominion down. We call them Rebels. Their high command is the Circle of Eighteen. They are powerful wizards who steal into the empire masterminding rebellion. The empire is fraying round its edges. The Lady's armies have been losing battles even when commanded by the Taken. The future looks grim. The Rebel grows stronger daily.

If one chooses sides on emotion, then the Rebel is the guy to go with. He is fighting for everything men claim to honor: freedom, independence, truth, the right.... All the subjective illusions, all the eternal trigger-words. We are minions of the villains of the piece. We confess the illusion and deny the substance.

There are no self-proclaimed villains, only regiments of self-proclaimed saints. Victorious historians rule where good or evil lies.

We abjure labels. We are the Black Company. We fight for money and an indefinable pride. The politics, the ethics, the moralities are irrelevant.

Soulcatcher hired us on open-end contract. We will serve the Lady till She falls.

V

One-Eye contacted Soulcatcher. He said he'd come. Goblin said the old spook howled with glee. He smelled a chance to raise his stock and scuttle that of the Limper. The Ten squabble and backbite worse than spoiled children.

Winter relaxed its siege briefly. The men and native staff began clearing Meystrikt's courtyards. One of the natives disappeared. In the main hall, One-Eye and Silent looked smug over their cards. The Rebel was being told what they wanted him to hear.

"What's happening on the wall?" I asked. Elmo had rigged block and tackle and was working a crenel stone loose. "What're you going to do with that block?"

"A little sculpture. Croaker. I've taken up a new hobby."

"So don't tell me. See if I care."

"Take that attitude if you want. I was going to ask if you could go after Raker with us. So you could put it in the Annals right."

"With a word about One-Eye's genius?"

"Credit where credit is due, Croaker."

"Then Silent is due a chapter, isn't he?"

He sputtered. He grumbled. He cursed. "You want to play a hand?" They had only three players, one of whom was Raven. Tonk is more interesting with four or five.

I won three hands straight.

"Don't you have anything to do? A wart to cut off, or something?"

"You asked him to play," a kibitzing soldier said.

"You like flies, Otto?"

"Flies?"

"Going to turn you into a frog if you don't shut your mouth."

Otto was not impressed. "You couldn't turn a tadpole into a frog."

I snickered. "You asked for it, One-Eye. When's Soulcatcher going to show?"

"When he gets here."

I nodded. There is no apparent rhyme or reason to the way the Taken do things. "Regular Cheerful Charlie today, aren't we? How much has he lost, Otto?"

Otto just smirked.

Raven won the next two hands.

One-Eye swore off talking. So much for discovering the nature of his project. Probably for the best. An explanation never made could not be overheard by the Rebel's spies.

Six hairs and a block of limestone. What the hell?

For days Silent, Goblin, and One-Eye took turns working that stone. I visited the stable occasionally. They let me watch, and growl when they wouldn't answer questions.

The Captain, too, sometimes poked his head in, shrugged, and went back to his quarters. He was juggling strategies for a spring campaign which would throw all available imperial might against the Rebel. His rooms were impenetrable, so numerous were the maps and reports.

We'd had only limited contact with the Rebel since arriving. We'd hurt him some, but nothing like we meant to when the weather turned.

Cruel it may be, but most of us enjoy what we do - and the Captain more than anyone. This is a favorite game, matching wits with a Raker. He is blind to the dead, the burning villages, the starving children. As is the Rebel, who boasts, that he is rescuing people from tyranny. Two blind armies, able to see nothing but one another.

VI

Soulcatcher came in the deep hours, amidst a blizzard which beggared the one Elmo endured. The wind wailed and howled. Snow had drifted against the northeast corner of the fortress, battlement-high, and was spilling over. Wood and hay stores were becoming a concern. Locals said it was the worst blizzard in history.

At its height, Soulcatcher came. The boom-boom-boom of his knock wakened all Meystrikt. Horns sounded. Drums rolled. The gatehouse watch screeched against the wind. They couldn't open the gate.

Soulcatcher came over the wall via the drift. He fell, nearly vanished in the loose snow in the forecourt. Hardly a dignified arrival for one of the Ten.

I hurried to the main hall. One-Eye, Silent, and Goblin were there already, with the fire blazing merrily. The Lieutenant appeared, followed by the Captain. Elmo and Raven came with the Captain. "Send the rest back to bed," the Lieutenant snapped.

Soulcatcher came in, removed a heavy black greatcloak, squatted before the fire. A calculatedly human gesture⁷ I wondered.

Soulcatcher's slight body is always sheathed in black leather, throat to toe. He wears a head-hiding black morion, black gloves, and black boots. Only a couple of silver badges break the monotony of his apparel. The only color about him is the uncut ruby forming the pommel of his dagger. A five-taloned claw clutches the gem to the handle of the weapon.

Small, soft curves interrupt the flatness of Soulcatcher's chest. There is a feminine flair to his hips and legs. Three of the Taken are female, but which are which only the Lady knows. We call them all he. Their sex won't ever mean a thing to us.

We wear Soulcatcher's badges, though he is only a patron, not our master. His protection helps when we have to deal with others of the Taken.

He claims to be our friend, our champion. Even so, his presence brought a different chill to the hall.

The cold of him has nothing to do with climate. Even One-Eye shivers when he is around.

And Raven? I don't know. Raven seems incapable of feeling, except for Darling. Someday that great stone face will break. I hope I'm there to see it.

Soulcatcher turned his back to the fire. "So." High-pitched. "Fine weather for an adventure." Baritone. Strange sounds followed. Laughter. Soulcatcher had made a joke.

Nobody laughed.

We were not supposed to laugh. Soulcatcher turned to One-Eye. "Tell me." This in tenor, slow and soft, with a muffled quality, as if it were coming through a thin wall. Or, as Elmo says, from beyond the grave.

Soulcatcher's voice changes every time he speaks, as if there are a hundred people taking turns talking. Spooky, but you get used to it - till you catch the voices arguing with one another.

There was no bluster or showman in One-Eye now. "We'll start from the beginning. Captain?"

The Captain said, "One of our informants caught wind of a meeting of the Rebel captains. One-Eye,

Goblin, and Silent followed the movements of known Rebels...."

"You let them run around loose?"

"They lead us to their friends."

"Of course. One of the Limper's shortcomings. No imagination. He kills them where he finds them - along with everyone else in sight."

Again that weird laughter. "Less effective, yes?" There was another sentence, but in no language I know.

The Captain nodded. "Elmo?"

Elmo told his part as he had before, word for word. He passed the tale to One-Eye, who sketched a scheme for taking Raker. I didn't understand, but Soulcatcher caught it instantly. He laughed a third time.

I gathered we were going to unleash the dark side of human nature.

One-Eye took Soulcatcher to see his mystery stone. We moved closer to the fire. Silent produced a deck. There were no takers.

Sometimes I wonder how the regulars stay sane. They're around the Taken all the time. Soulcatcher is a sweetheart compared to the others.

One-Eye and Soulcatcher returned, laughing. "Two of a kind," Elmo muttered, in a rare statement of opinion.

Soulcatcher recaptured the fire. "Well done, gentlemen. Very well done. Imaginative. This could break them in the Salient. We start for Roses when the weather breaks. A party of eight, Captain, including two of your witchmen." Each sentence was followed by a break. Each was in a different voice. Weird.

I have heard those are the voices of all the people whose souls Soulcatcher has caught.

Bolder than my wont, I volunteered for the expedition. I wanted to see how Raker could be taken with hair and a block of limestone. The Limper had failed with all his furious power.

The Captain thought about it. "Okay, Croaker. One-Eye and Goblin. You, Elmo. And pick two more."

"That's seven, Captain."

"Raven makes eight."

"Oh. Raven. Of course."

Of course. Quiet, deadly Raven would be the Captain's alter ego. There is a bond between those men which surpasses understanding. It is a more than brothers thing.... Guess it bothers me because Raven scares the hell out of me. More than do the Taken.

Soulcatcher strikes me as an ancestral Raven. They are of a size, and Raven has that same air of the ice-hearted and impassive.

Raven caught the Captain's eye. His right eyebrow rose. The Captain replied with a ghost of a nod. Raven twitched a shoulder. What was the message? I could not guess.

Something unusual was in the wind. Those in the know found it delicious. Though I could not guess what it was, I knew it would be slick and nasty.

VII

The storm broke. Soon the Roses road was open. Soulcatcher fretted. Raker had two weeks' start. It would take us a week to reach Roses. One-Eye's planted tales might lose their efficacy before we arrived.

We left before dawn, the limestone block aboard a wagon. The wizards had done little but carve out a modest cavity the size of a large melon. I could not fathom its value. One-Eye and Goblin fussed over it like a groom over a new bride. One-Eye answered my questions with big grins. Bastard.

The weather held fair. Warm winds blew out of the south. We encountered long stretches of muddy road. And I witnessed an outrageous phenomenon. Soulcatcher got down in the mud and dragged that wagon with the rest of us. That great lord of the empire.

Roses is the queen city of the Salient, a teeming sprawl, a free city, a republic. The Lady hasn't seen fit to revoke its traditional autonomy. The world needs places where men of all stripes and stations can step outside the usual strictures.

So. Roses. Owing no master. Filled with agents and spies and those who live on the dark side of the law. In that environment, One-Eye claimed, his scheme had to prosper.

Roses' red walls loomed over us, dark as old blood in the light of the setting sun, when we arrived.

VIII

Goblin ambled into the room we had taken. "I found the place," he squeaked at One-Eye.

"Good."

Curious. They had not exchanged a cross word in weeks. Usually an hour without a squabble was a miracle.

Soulcatcher shifted in the shadowed corner where he remained planted like a lean black bush, a crowd softly debating with itself. "Go on."

"It's an old public square. A dozen alleys and streets going in and out. Poorly lighted at night. No reason for any traffic after dark."

"Sounds perfect," One-Eye said.

"It is. I rented a room overlooking it."

"Let's take a look," Elmo said. We all suffered from cabin fever. An exodus started. Only Soulcatcher stayed put. Perhaps he understood our need to get away.

Goblin was right about the square, apparently. "So what?" I asked. One-Eye grinned. I snapped, "Clam-lips! Play games."

"Tonight?" Goblin asked.

"I'm getting frustrated," I announced. "What's going on? All you clowns do is play cards and watch Raven sharpen his knives." That went on for hours at a time, the movement of whetstone across steel sending chills down my spine. It was an omen. Raven doesn't do that unless he expects things to get nasty.

One-Eye made a sound like a cawling crow.

IX

We rolled the wagon at midnight. The stablekeeper called us madmen. One-Eye gave him one of his famous grins. He drove. The rest of us walked, surrounding the wagon.

There had been changes. Something had been added. Someone had incised the stone with a message. One-Eye, probably, during one of his unexplained forays out of quarters.

Bulky leather sacks and a stout plank table had joined the stone. The table looked capable of bearing the block. Its legs were of a dark, polished wood. Inlaid in them were symbols in silver and ivory, very complex, hieroglyphical, mystical.

"Where'd you get the table?" I asked. Goblin squeaked, laughed. I growled, "Why the hell can't you tell me now?"

"Okay," One-Eye said, chuckling nastily. "We made it."

"What for?"

"To sit our rock on."

"You're not telling me anything."

"Patience, Croaker. All in due time." Bastard.

There was a strangeness about our square. It was foggy. There had been no fog anywhere else.

One-Eye stopped the wagon in the square's center. "Out with that table, boys."

"Out with you," Goblin squawked. "Think you can malingering your way through this?" He wheeled on Elmo. "Damned old cripple's always got an excuse."

"He's got a point, One-Eye." One-Eye protested. Elmo snapped, "Get your butt down off there."

One-Eye glared at Goblin. "Going to get you someday, Chubbo. Curse of impotence. How's that sound?"

Goblin was not impressed. "I'd put a curse of stupidity on you if I could improve on Nature."

"Get the damned table down," Elmo snapped.

"You nervous?" I asked. He never gets riled at their fussing. Treats it as part of the entertainment.

"Yeah. You and Raven get up there and push."

That table was heavier than it looked. It took all of us to get it off the wagon. One-Eye's faked grunts and curses did not help. I asked him how he got it on.

"Built it there, dummy," he said, then fussed at us, wanting it moved a half inch this way, a half inch that.

"Let it be," Soulcatcher said. "We don't have time for this." His displeasure had a salutary effect. Neither One-Eye nor Goblin said another word.

We slid the stone onto the table. I stepped back, wiped sweat from my face. I was soaked. In the middle of winter. That rock radiated heat.

"The bags," Soulcatcher said. That voice sounded like a woman I wouldn't mind meeting.

I grabbed one, grunted. It was heavy. "Hey. This's money."

One-Eye snickered. I heaved the sack into the pile under the table. A damned fortune there. I'd never seen so much in one place, in fact.

"Cut the bags," Soulcatcher ordered. "Hurry it up!"

Raven slashed the sacks. Treasure dribbled onto the cobblestones. We stared, lusting in our hearts.

Soulcatcher caught One-Eye's shoulder, took Goblin's arm. Both wizards seemed to shrink. They faced table and stone. Soulcatcher said, "Move the wagon."

I still had not read the immortal message they had carved on the rock. I darted in for a look.

LET HE WHO WOULD CLAIM THIS WEALTH SEAT THE HEAD OF THE CREATURE
RAKER WITHIN THIS THRONE OF STONE.

Ah. Aha. Plain-spoken. Straightforward. Simple. Just our style. Ha.

I stepped back, tried to guess the magnitude of Soulcatcher's investment. I spied gold amidst the hill of silver. One bag leaked uncut gems.

"The hair," Soulcatcher demanded. One-Eye produced the strands. Soulcatcher thumbed them into the walls of the head-sized cavity. He stepped back, joined hands with One-Eye and Goblin.

They made magic.

Treasure, table, and stone began to shed a golden glow.

Our archfoe was a dead man. Half the world would try to collect this bounty. It was too big to resist. His own people would turn on him.

I saw one slim chance for him. He could steal the treasure himself. Tough job, though. No Rebel Prophet could out-magick one of the Taken.

They completed their spell-casting. "Somebody test it," One-Eye said.

There was a vicious crackle when Raven's daggertip pricked the plane of the tablelegs. He cursed, scowled at his weapon. Elmo thrust with his sword. Crackle, The tip of his blade glowed.

"Excellent," Soulcatcher said. "Take the wagon away."

Elmo detailed a man. The rest of us fled to the room Goblin had rented.

X

At first we crowded the window, willing something to happen. That palled fast. Roses did not discover the doom we'd set for Raker till sunrise.

Cautious entrepreneurs found a hundred ways to go after that money. Crowds came just to see. One enterprising band started tearing up the street to dig under. Police ran them off.

Soulcatcher took a seat beside the window and never moved. Once he told me, "Have to modify the spells. I didn't anticipate this much ingenuity."

Surprised at my own audacity, I asked, "What's the Lady like?" I'd just finished one of my fantasy sketches.

He turned slowly, stared briefly. "Something that will bite steel." The voice was female and catty. An odd answer. Then, "Have to keep them from using tools."

So much for getting an eyewitness report. I should have known better. We mortals are mere objects to the Taken. Our curiosities are of supreme indifference. I retreated to my secret kingdom and its spectrum of imaginary Ladies.

Soulcatcher modified the ward sorceries that night. Next morning there were corpses in the square.

One-Eye wakened me the third night. "Got a customer." "Hunh?"

"A guy with a head." He was pleased.

I stumbled to the window. Goblin and Raven were there already. We crowded one side. Nobody wanted to get too close to Soulcatcher.

A man stole across the square below. A head dangled from his hand. He carried it by its hair. I said, "I wondered how long it'd be till this started."

"Silence," Soulcatcher hissed. "He's out there."

"Who?"

He was patient. Remarkably patient. Another of the Taken would have struck me down. "Raker. Don't give us away."

I don't know how he knew. Maybe I wouldn't want to find out. Those things scare me.

"A sneak visit was in the scenario," Goblin whispered, squeaking. How can he squeak when he whispers? "Raker was to find out what he's up against. He can't do that from anywhere else." The fat little man seemed proud.

The Captain calls human nature our sharpest blade. Curiosity and a will to survive drew Raker into our cauldron. Maybe he would turn it on us. We have a lot of handles sticking out.

Weeks passed. Raker came again and again, apparently content to observe. Soulcatcher told us to let him be, no matter how easy a target he made of himself.

Our mentor might be considerate of us, but he has his cruel streak. It seemed he wanted to torment Raker with the uncertainty of his fate.

XI

This burg is going bounty-crazy," Goblin squealed. He danced one of his jigs. "You ought to get out more, Croaker. They're turning Raker into an industry." He beckoned me into the corner farthest from Soulcatcher. "Look here," he whispered.

He had a double fistful of coins. Some were gold. I observed, "You're going to be walking tilted to one side."

He grinned. Goblin grinning is a sight to behold. He has the widest mouth on the continent. Opens up like a frog's, practically. "Made this selling tips on where to find Raker," he whispered. With a glance toward Soul-catcher: "Bogus tips." He put a hand on my shoulder. He had to stretch to do it. "You can get rich out there."

"Didn't know we were in this to get rich."

He scowled, his round, pale face becoming all wrinkles. "What are you? Some kind of...?"

Soulcatcher turned. Goblin croaked, "Just an argument about a bet, sir. Just a bet."

I laughed aloud. "Really convincing, Chubbo. Why not just hang yourself?"

He pouted, but not for long. Goblin is irrepressible. His humor breaks through in the most depressing situations. He whispered, "Shit, Croaker, you should see what One-Eye is doing. Selling amulets. Guaranteed to tell if there's a Rebel close by." A glance at Soulcatcher. "They really work, too. Sort of."

I shook my head. "At least he'll be able to pay his card debts." That was One-Eye all over. He had had it rough at Meystrikt, where there was no room for his usual foray into the black market. "You guys are supposed to be planting rumors. Keeping the pot boiling, not...."

"Sshh!" He glanced at Soulcatcher again. "We are. Every dive in town. Hell, the rumor mill is berserk out there. Come on. I'll show you."

"No." Soulcatcher was talking more and more. I had hopes of inveigling a real conversation.

"Your loss. I know a bookmaker taking bets on when Raker will lose his head. You got inside dope, you know."

"Scoot out of here before you lose yours."

I went to the window. A minute later Goblin scampered across the square below. He passed our trap without glancing its way.

"Let them play their games," Soul-catcher said.

"Sir?" My new approach. Brown-nosing.

"My ears are sharper than your friend realizes."

I searched the face of that black morion, trying to capture some hint of the thoughts behind the metal.

"It's of no consequence." He shifted slightly, stared past me. "The underground is paralyzed."

"Sir?"

"The mortar in that house is rotting. It'll crumble soon. That wouldn't have happened had we taken Raker immediately. They would have made a martyr of him. The loss would have saddened them, but they would have gone on. The Circle would have replaced Raker in time for the spring campaigns."

I stared into the plaza. Why was Soulcatcher telling me this? And all in one voice. Was it the voice of the real Soulcatcher?

"Because you thought I was being cruel for cruelty's sake."

I jumped. "How did you...?"

Soulcatcher made the sound which passed as laughter. "No. I didn't read your mind. I know how minds work. I'm the Catcher of Souls, remember?"

Do the Taken get lonely? Do they yearn for simple companionship? Friendship?

"Sometimes." This in one of the female voices. A seductive one.

I half turned, then faced the square quickly, frightened.

Soulcatcher read that, too. He went back to Raker. "Simple elimination was never my plan. I want the hero of Forsberg to discredit himself."

Soulcatcher knew our enemy better than we suspected. Raker was playing his game. Already he had made two spectacular, vain attempts on our trap. Those failures had ruined his stock with fellow travelers. To hear tell, Roses seethed with pro-empire sentiment.

"He'll make a fool of himself, then we'll squash him. Like a noxious beetle."

"Don't underestimate him." What audacity. Giving advice to one of the Taken. "The Limper...."

"That I won't do. I'm not the Limper. He and Raker are two of a kind. In the old times.... The Dominator would have made him one of us."

"What was he like?" Get him talking, Croaker. From the Dominator it's only one step to the Lady.

Soulcatcher's right hand rolled palm upward, opened, slowly made a claw. The gesture rattled me. I imagined that claw ripping at my soul. End of conversation.

Later on I told Elmo, "You know, that thing out there didn't have to be real. Anything would have done the job if the mob couldn't get to it."

Soulcatcher said, "Wrong. Raker had to know it was real."

Next morning we heard from the Captain. News, mostly. A few Rebel partisans were surrendering their weapons in response to an amnesty offer. Some mainforcers who had come south with Raker were pulling out. The confusion had reached the Circle. Raker's failure in Roses worried them.

"Why's that?" I asked. "Nothing's really happened."

Soulcatcher replied, "It's happening on the other side. In peoples' minds." Was there a hint of smugness there? "Raker, and by extension the Circle, looks impotent. He should have yielded the Salient to another Commander."

"If I was a big-time general, I probably wouldn't admit to a screw-up either," I said.

"Croaker," Elmo gasped, amazed. I don't speak my mind, usually.

"It's true, Elmo. Can you picture any general - ours or theirs - asking somebody to take over for him?"

That black morion faced me. "Their faith is dying. An army without faith in itself is beaten more surely than an army defeated in battle." When Soulcatcher gets on a subject nothing deflects him.

I had a funny feeling he might be the type to yield command to someone better able to exercise it.

"We tighten the screws now. All of you. Tell it in the taverns. Whisper it in the streets. Burn him. Drive him. Push him so hard he doesn't have time to think. I want him so desperate he tries something stupid."

I thought Soulcatcher had the right idea. This fragment of the Lady's war would not be won on a battlefield.

Spring was at hand, yet fighting had not yet begun. The eyes of the Salient were locked on the free city, awaiting the outcome of this duel between Raker and the Lady's champion.

Soulcatcher observed, "It's no longer necessary to kill Raker. His credibility is dead. Now we're destroying the confidence of his movement." He resumed his vigil at the window.

Elmo said, "Captain says the Circle ordered Raker out. He wouldn't go."

"He revolted against his own revolution?"

"He wants to beat this trap."

Another facet of human nature working for our side. Overweening pride.

"Get some cards out. Goblin and One-Eye have been robbing widows and orphans again. Time to clean them out."

Raker was on his own, hunted, haunted, a whipped dog running the alleys of the night. He could not trust anyone. I felt sorry for him. Almost.

He was a fool. Only a fool keeps betting against the odds. The odds against Raker were getting longer by the hour.

XII

I jerked a thumb at the darkness near the window. "Sounds like a convening of the Brotherhood of Whispers."

Raven glanced over my shoulder, said nothing. We were playing head-to-toe Tonk, a time-killer of a game.

A dozen voices murmured over there. "I smell it." "You're wrong." "It's in from the south." "End it now." "Not yet." "It's time." "Needs a while longer." "Pushing our luck. The game could turn." "Ware pride." "It's here. The stench of it runs before it like the breath of a jackal."

"Wonder if he ever loses an argument with himself?"

Still Raven said nothing. In my more daring moods I try to draw him out. Without luck. I was doing better with Soulcatcher.

Soulcatcher rose suddenly, an angry noise rising from deep inside him.

"What is it?" I asked. I was tired of Roses. I was disgusted with Roses. Roses bored and frightened me. It was worth a man's life to go into those streets alone.

One of those spook voices was right. We were approaching a point of diminishing returns. I was developing a grudging admiration for Raker myself. The man refused to surrender or run.

"What is it?" I asked again.

"The Limper. He's in Roses."

"Here? Why?"

"He smells a big kill. He wants to steal the credit."

"You mean muscle in on our action?"

"That's his style."

"Wouldn't the Lady...."

"This's Roses. She's a long way off. And she doesn't care who gets him."

Politics among the Lady's viceroys? My, my. It is a strange world. I don't understand people outside the Company.

We lead a simple life. No thinking required. The Captain takes care of that. We just follow orders. For most of us the Black Company is a hiding place, a refuge from yesterday, a place to become a new man.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"I'll handle the Limper." He began seeing to his apparel.

Goblin and One-Eye staggered in. They were so drunk they had to prop each other up. "Shit," Goblin squeaked. "Snowing again. Goddamned snow. I thought winter was over."

One-Eye burst into song. Something about the beauties of winter. I couldn't follow him. His speech was slurred and he had forgotten half the words.

Goblin fell into a chair, forgetting One-Eye. One-Eye collapsed at his feet. He vomited on Goblin's boots, tried to continue his song. Goblin muttered, "Where the hell is everybody?"

"Out carousing around." I exchanged looks with Raven. "Do you believe this? Those two getting drunk together?"

"Where you going, old spook?" Goblin squeaked at Soulcatcher. Soulcatcher went out without answering. "Bastard. Hey. One-Eye, old buddy. That right? Old spook a bastard?"

One-Eye levered himself off the floor, looked around. I don't think he

was seeing with the eye he had. "S'right." He scowled at me. "Bassard. All bassard." Something struck him funny. He giggled.

Goblin joined him. When Raven and I did not get the joke, he put on a very dignified face and said, "Not our kind in here, old buddy. Warmer out in the snow." He helped One-Eye stand. They staggered out the door.

"Hope they don't do anything stupid. More stupid. Like show off. They'll kill themselves."

"Tonk," Raven said. He spread his cards. Those two might not have come in for all the response he showed.

Ten or fifty hands later one of the soldiers we'd brought burst in. "You seen Elmo?" he demanded.

I glanced at him. Snow was melting in his hair. He was pale, scared. "No. What happened, Hagop?"

"Somebody stabbed Otto. I think it was Raker. I run him off."

"Stabbed? He dead?" I started looking for my kit. Otto would need me more than he'd need Elmo. "No. Cut bad. Lot of blood." "Why didn't you bring him?" "Couldn't carry him." He was drunk too. The attack on his friend had sobered him some, but that would not last. "You sure it was Raker?" Was the old fool trying to hit back?

"Sure. Hey, Croaker. Come on. He's gonna die."

"I'm coming. I'm coming." "Wait." Raven was pawing through

his gear. "I'm going." He balanced a pair of finely honed knives, debating a choice. He shrugged, stuck both inside his belt. "Get yourself a cloak. Croaker. It's cold out there."

While I found one he grilled Hagop about Otto's whereabouts, told him to stay put till Elmo showed. Then, "Let's go, Croaker."

Down the stairs. Into the streets. Raven's walk is deceptive. He never seems hurried, but you have to hustle to stay up.

Snowing wasn't the half of it. Even where the streets were lighted you couldn't see twenty feet. It was six inches deep already. Heavy, wet stuff. But the temperature was falling, and a wind was coming up. Another blizzard? Damn, hadn't we had enough?

We found Otto a quarter block from where he was supposed to be. He had dragged himself under some steps. Raven went right to him. How he knew where to look I'll never know. We carried Otto to the nearest light. He could not help himself. He was out. I snorted. "Dead drunk. Only danger was freezing to death." He had blood all over him but his wound was not bad. "Needs some stitches, that's all." We lugged him back to the room. I stripped him and got sewing while he was in no shape to bitch.

Otto's sidekick was asleep. Raven kicked him till he woke up. "I want the truth," Raven said. "How'd it happen?"

Hagop told it, insisting, "It was Raker, man. It was Raker."

I doubted that. So did Raven. But when I finished my needlepoint. Raven said, "Get your sword, Croaker." He had the hunter's look. I did not want to go out again, but even less did I want to argue with Raven when he was in that mood. I got my swordbelt.

The air was colder. The wind was stronger. The snowflakes were smaller and more biting when they hit my cheek. I stalked along behind Raven, wondering what the hell we were doing.

He found the place where Hagop was knifed. New snow had not yet obliterated the marks in the old. Raven squatted, stared. I wondered what he saw. There was not enough light to tell anything, so far as I could see.

"Maybe he wasn't lying," he said at last. He stared into the darkness of the alley whence the attacker had come.

"How do you know?"

He did not tell me. "Come on." He stalked into the alley.

I don't like alleys. I especially don't like them in cities like Roses, where they harbor every evil known to man, and probably a few still undiscovered. But Raven was going in.... Raven wanted my help.... Raven was my brother in the Black Company.... But, damned, a hot fire and warm wine would have been nicer.

I don't think I spent more than three or four hours exploring the city. Raven had gone out less than I had. Yet he seemed to know where he was going. He led me up side streets and down alleys, across thoroughfares and over bridges. Roses is pierced by three rivers, and a web of canals connect them. The bridges are one of Roses' claims to fame.

Bridges did not intrigue me at the moment. I was preoccupied with keeping up and trying to stay warm. My feet were hunks of ice. Snow kept getting in my boots, and Raven was in no mood to stop every time that happened.

On and on. Miles and hours. I never saw so many slums and stews....

"Stop!" Raven flung an arm across my path.

"What?"

"Quiet." He listened. I listened. I didn't hear anything. I hadn't seen much during our headlong rush, either. How could Raven be tracking Otto's assailant? I did not doubt that he was, I just couldn't figure it.

Truth told, nothing Raven did surprised me. Not since the day we met, when he strangled his wife in front of me.

"We're almost up with him." He peered into the blowing snow. "Go straight ahead, the pace we've been going. You'll catch him in a couple blocks."

"What? Where're you going?" I was carping at a fading shadow. "Damn you." I took a deep breath, cursed again, drew my sword, and started forward. All I could think was, how am I going to explain if we've got the wrong man?

Then I saw him in the light from a tavern door. A tall, lean man shuffling dispiritedly, oblivious to his surroundings. Raker? How would I know? Elmo and Otto were the only ones who'd been along on the farm raid....

Came the dawn. Only they could identify Raker for the rest of us. Otto was wounded and Elmo had not been heard from.... Where was he? Under a blanket of snow in some alley, cold as this hideous night?

My fright retreated before anger.

I sheathed my sword and drew a dagger. I kept it hidden inside my cloak. The figure ahead did not glance back as I overtook it, drew even.

"Rough night, eh, old-timer?"

He grunted noncommittally. Then he looked at me, eyes narrowing, when I fell into step beside him. He eased away, watched me closely. There was no fear in his eyes. He was sure of himself. Not the sort of old man you found wandering the streets of the slums.

"What do you want?" It was a calm, straightforward question.

He did not have to be frightened. I was scared enough for both of us. "You knifed a friend of mine, Raker."

He halted. A glint of something strange showed in his eye. "The Black Company?"

I nodded.

He stared, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "The physician. You're the physician. The one they call Croaker."

"Glad to meet you." I'm sure my voice sounded stronger than I felt.

I thought, what the hell do I do now?

Raker flung his cloak open. A short stabbing sword thrust my way. I slid aside, opened my own cloak, dodged again and tried to draw my sword.

Raker froze. He caught my eye. His eyes seemed to grow larger, larger.... I was falling into twin grey pools.... A smile tugged the corners of his mouth. He stepped toward me, blade rising....

And grunted suddenly. A look of total amazement came over his face. I shook his spell, stepped back, came to guard.

Raker turned slowly, faced the darkness. Raven's knife protruded from his back. Raker reached back and withdrew it. A mewl of pain passed his lips. He glared at the knife, then, ever so softly, began to sing.

"Move, Croaker!"

A spell! Fool. I had forgotten what Raker was. I charged.

Raven arrived at the same instant.

XIII

I looked at the body. "Now what?"

Raven knelt, produced another knife. It had a serrated edge. "Somebody claims Soulcatcher's bounty."

"He'd have a fit."

"You going to tell him?"

"No. But what'll we do with it?" There had been times when the Black Company was prosperous, but never when it was rich. Accumulation of wealth is not our purpose.

"I can use some of it. Old debts. The rest.... Divide it up. Send it back to Beryl. Whatever. It's there. Why let the Taken keep it?"

I shrugged. "Up to you. I just hope Soulcatcher don't think we crossed him."

"Only you and me know. I won't tell him." He brushed the snow off the old man's face. Raker was cooling fast.

Raven used his knife.

I'm a physician. I've removed limbs. I'm a soldier. I've seen some bloody battlefields. Nevertheless, I was queasy. Decapitating a dead man did not seem right.

Raven secured our grisly trophy inside his cloak. It didn't bother him. Once, on the way to our part of town, I asked, "Why did we go after him, anyway?"

He did not answer immediately. Then, "The Captain's last letter said get it over with if I had the chance."

As we neared the square, Raven said, "Go upstairs. See if the spook is there. If he's not, send the soberest man after our wagon. You come back here."

"Right." I sighed, hurried to our quarters. Anything for a little warmth.

The snow was a foot deep now. I was afraid my feet were permanently damaged.

"Where the hell you been?" Elmo demanded when I stumbled through the doorway. "Where's Raven?"

I looked around. No Soulcatcher. Goblin and One-Eye were back, dead to the world. Otto and Hagop were snoring like giants. "How's Otto?"

"Doing all right. What've you been up to?"

I settled myself beside our fire, prized my boots off. My feet were blue but not frozen. Soon they tingled painfully. My legs ached from all that walking through the snow, too. I told Elmo the whole story.

"You killed him?"

"Raven said the Captain wants done with the project."

"Yeah. I didn't figure Raven would go cut his throat."

"Where's Soulcatcher?"

"Hasn't been back." He grinned. "I'll get the wagon. Don't tell anybody else. Too many big mouths." He flung his cloak about his shoulders, stamped out.

My hands and feet felt halfway human. I scooted over and nabbed Otto's boots. He was about my size, and he didn't need them.

Out into the night again. Morning, almost. Dawn was due soon.

If I expected any remonstrance from Raven, I was disappointed. He just looked at me. I think he actually shivered. I remember thinking, maybe he's human after all. "Had to change my boots." Then, "Elmo's getting the wagon. The rest of them are passed out."

"Soulcatcher?"

"Not back yet."

"Let's plant this seed." He strode into the swirling flakes. I hurried after him.

The snow had not collected on our trap. It sat there glowing gold. Water puddled beneath it and trickled away to become ice.

"You think Soulcatcher will know when this thing gets discharged?" I asked.

"It's a good bet. Goblin and One-Eye, too."

"The place could burn down around those two and they wouldn't turn over."

"Nevertheless.... Sshh! Somebody out there. Go that way." He moved the other direction, circling.

What am I doing this for? I thought as I skulked through the snow, weapon in hand. I ran into Raven.

"See anything?"

He glared into the darkness. "Somebody was here." He sniffed the air, turned his head slowly right and left. "Come on." He took a dozen quick steps, pointed down.

He was right. The trail was fresh. The departing half looked hurried.

I stared at those marks. "I don't like it, Raven."

Our visitor's spoor indicated that he dragged his right foot.

"The Limper."

"We don't know for sure."

"Who else? Where's Elmo?"

We returned to the Raker trap, waited impatiently. Raven paced. He muttered. I could not recall ever having seen him this unsettled. Once, he said, "The Limper isn't Soulcatcher."

Really. Soulcatcher is almost human. The Limper is as cruel and inhuman as the Taken come. The sort of creature who enjoys torturing babies.

A jangle of traces and squeak of poorly greased wheels entered the plaza. Elmo and the wagon appeared. Elmo pulled up and jumped down.

"Where the hell you been?" Fear and weariness made me cross.

"Takes time to dig out a stableboy and get a team ready. What's the matter? What happened?"

"The Limper was here."

"Oh, shit. What'd he do?"

"Nothing. He just...."

"Let's move," Raven snapped. "Before he comes back." He took the head to the stone. The wardspells might not have existed. He fitted the trophy into the waiting cavity. The golden glow winked out.

Snowflakes began accumulating on head and stone.

"Let's go," Elmo gasped. "We won't have much time."

I grabbed a sack and heaved it into the wagon. Thoughtful Elmo had laid out a tarp to keep loose coins from dribbling between the floorboards.

Raven told me to rake up the loose stuff under the table. "Elmo, empty some of those sacks and give them to Croaker."

They heaved bags. I scrambled after loose coins.

"One minute gone," Raven said. Half the bags were in the wagon.

"Too much loose stuff," I said.

"We'll leave it if we have to."

"What're we going to do with it? How'll we hide it?"

"In the hay in the stable," Raven said. "For now. Later we put a false bed in the wagon. Two minutes gone."

"What about wagon tracks?" Elmo asked. "He could follow them to the stable."

"Why should he care in the first place?" I wondered aloud.

Raven ignored me. He asked Elmo, "You didn't cancel them coming here?"

"Didn't think of it."

"Damn!"

All the sacks were aboard. Elmo and Raven helped with the loose stuff.

"Three minutes," Raven said, then, "Quiet!" He listened. "Soulcatcher couldn't be here already, could he? No. The Limper again. Come on. You drive, Elmo. Head for a thoroughfare. Lose us in traffic. I'll follow you. Croaker, go try to cover Elmo's back-trail."

"Where is he?" Elmo asked, staring into the falling snow.

Raven pointed. "We'll have to lose him. Or he'll take it away. Go on, Croaker. Get moving. Elmo."

"Get up!" Elmo snapped his traces. The wagon creaked away.

I ducked under the table and stuffed my pockets, then ran away from where Raven said the Limper was.

XIV

I don't know that I had much luck obscuring Elmo's back trail. I think we were helped more by morning traffic than anything I did. I did get rid of the stableboy. I gave him a sock full of gold and silver, more

than he could make in years of stable work, and asked him if he could lose himself. Away from Roses, preferably. He told me, "I won't even stop to get my things." He dropped his pitchfork and headed out, never to be seen again.

I hied myself back to our room.

Everyone was sleeping but Otto. "Oh, Croaker," he said. "Bout time."

"Pain?"

"Yeah."

"Hangover?"

"That too."

"Let's see what we can do. How long you been awake?"

"An hour, I guess."

"Soulcatcher been here?"

"No. What happened to him, anyway?"

"I don't know."

"Hey. Those are my boots. What the hell you think you're doing, wearing my boots?"

"Take it easy. Drink this."

He drank. "Come on. What're you doing wearing my boots?"

I removed the boots and set them near the fire, which had burned quite low. Otto kept after me while I added coal. "If you don't calm down you're going to rip your stitches."

I will say this for our people. They pay attention when my advice is medical. Angry as he was, he lay back, forced himself to lie still. He did not stop cussing.

I shed my wet things and donned a nightshirt I found lying around. I don't know where it came from. It was too short. I put a pot on for tea, then turned to Otto. "Let's take a closer look." I dragged my kit over.

I was cleaning around the wound, and Otto was cursing softly when I heard the sound: Scrape-dump, scrape clump. It stopped outside the door.

Otto sensed my fear. "What's the matter?"

"It's...." The door opened behind me. I glanced back. I'd guessed right.

The Limper went to the table, dropped into a chair, surveyed the room. His gaze skewered me.

Inanely, I said, "I just started tea."

He stared at the wet boots and cloak, then at each man in the room. Then at me again.

The Limper is not a big man. Barely over five feet tall, and of slightly under average build. Meeting him in the street, not knowing what he was, you would not be impressed. Like Soulcatcher, he was clad in a single color, a dingy brown. He was ragged. His face was concealed by a battered leather mask which drooped. Tangled threads of hair protruded from under his hood and around his mask. It was grey peppered with black.

He did not say a word. Just sat there and stared. Not knowing what else to do, I finished tending Otto, then made the tea. I poured three tin cups, gave one to Otto, set one before the Limper, took the third myself...

What now? No excuse to be busy.

Nowhere to sit but at that table.... Oh, shit!

The Limper removed his mask. He raised the tin cup....

I could not tear my gaze away.

His was the face of a dead man, of a mummy improperly preserved. His eyes were alive and baleful, yet directly beneath one was a patch of flesh which had rotted. Beneath his nose, at the right corner of his mouth, a square inch of lip was missing, revealing gum and yellowed teeth.

The Limper sipped tea, met my eye, and smiled.

I nearly dribbled down my leg.

I went to the window. There was some light out there now, and the snowfall was weakening, but I could not see the stone.

The stamp of boots sounded on the stair. Elmo and Raven shoved into the room. Elmo growled, "Hey, Croaker, how the hell did you get rid of that...." His words grew smaller as he recognized our visitor.

Raven gave me a questioning look. The Limper turned. I shrugged when his back was to me. Raven moved to one side, began removing his wet things.

Elmo got the idea. He went the other way, stripped beside the fire. "Damn, it's good to get out of those. How's the boy, Otto?"

"There's fresh tea," I said.

Otto replied, "I hurt all over, Elmo."

The Limper peered at each of us, and at One-Eye and Goblin, who had yet to stir. "So. Soulcatcher brings the Black Company's best." His voice was a whisper, yet it filled the room. "Where is he?"

Raven ignored him. He donned dry breeches, sat beside Otto, doublechecked my handiwork. "Good job of stitching, Croaker."

"I get plenty of practice with this outfit."

Elmo shrugged in response to the Limper. He drained his cup, poured tea all around, then filled the pot from one of the pitchers. He planted a boot in One-Eye's ribs while the Limper glared at Raven.

"You!" the Limper snapped. "I haven't forgotten what you did in Opal. Nor during the campaign in Forsberg."

Raven settled with his back against the wall. He produced one of his more wicked knives, began cleaning his fingernails. He smiled. At the Limper, he smiled, and there was mockery in his eyes.

Didn't anything scare that man?

"What did you do with the money? That wasn't Soulcatcher's. The Lady gave it to me."

I took courage from Raven's stance. "Aren't you supposed to be in Elm? The Lady ordered you out of the Salient."

Anger distorted that wretched face. A scar ran down his forehead and left cheek. It stood out. Supposedly it continued down his left breast. The blow had been struck by the White Rose herself.

The Limper rose. And that damned Raven said, "Got the cards, Elmo? The table's free."

The Limper scowled. The tension level was rising fast. He snapped, "I want that money. It's mine. Your choice is to cooperate or not. I don't think you'll enjoy it if you don't."

"You want it, go get it," Raven said. "Catch Raker, chop off his head, take it to the stone. Ought to be easy for the Limper. Raker's only a bandit. What chance would he stand against the Limper?"

I thought the Taken would explode. He did not. For an instant he was baffled.

He was not off balance long. "All right. If you want it the hard way." His smile was wide and cruel. Did he have some special interest in Raven?

The tension was near the snapping point.

XV

A shadow moved in the open doorway. A lean, dark figure appeared, stared at the Limper's back. I sighed in relief.

The Limper spun. For a moment the air seemed to crackle between the Taken.

From the corner of one eye I noted that Goblin was sitting up. His fingers were dancing in complex rhythms. One-Eye, facing the wall, was whispering into his bedroll. Raven reversed his knife for a throw. Elmo got a grip on the teapot, ready to fling hot water.

There was no missile within grabbing distance of me. What the hell could I contribute? A chronicle of the blowup afterward, if I survived?

Soulcatcher made a tiny gesture, stepped round the Limper, deposited himself in his usual seat. He flung a toe out, hooked one of the chairs away from the table, put his feet up. He stared at the Limper, his fingers steepled before his mouth. "The Lady sent a message. In case I ran into you. She wants to see you." Soulcatcher used only one voice. A hard female voice. "She wants to ask about the uprising in Elm."

The Limper jerked. One hand extended over the table, twitched nervously. "Uprising? In Elm?"

"Rebels attacked the palace and barracks."

The Limper's leathery face lost color. The twitching of his hand became more pronounced.

Soulcatcher said, "She wants to know why you weren't there to head them off."

The Limper stayed about three seconds more. In that time his face became grotesque. Seldom have I seen such naked fear. Then he spun and fled.

Raven flipped his knife. It stuck in the doorframe. The Limper didn't notice.

Soulcatcher laughed. This was not the laugh of earlier days, but a deep, harsh, solid, vindictive laughter. He rose, turned to the window. "Ah. Someone's claimed our prize? When did that happen?"

Elmo masked his response by going to close the door. Raven said, "Toss me my knife." I eased up beside Soulcatcher, looked out. The snowfall had ceased. The stone was visible. Cold, unglowing, with an inch of white on top.

"I don't know." I hoped I sounded sincere. "The snow was heavy all night. Last time I looked - before he showed up - I couldn't see a thing. Maybe I'd better go down."

"Don't bother." He adjusted his chair so he could watch the square. Later, after he had accepted tea from Elmo and finished it - concealing his face by turning away - he mused, "Raker eliminated. His vermin in panic. And, sweeter still, the Limper embarrassed again. Not a bad job."

"Was that true?" I asked. "About Elm?"

"Every word," in a fey, merry voice. "One does wonder how the Rebel knew the Limper was out of town. And how Shapeshifter caught wind of the trouble quickly enough to show up and quash it before it amounted to anything." Another pause. "No doubt the Limper will ponder that while he's recuperating." He laughed again, more softly, more darkly.

Elmo and I busied ourselves preparing breakfast. Otto usually handled the cooking. So we had an excuse for breaking routine. After a time, Soulcatcher observed, "There's no point to you people staying here. Your Captain's prayers have been answered."

"We can go?" Elmo asked.

"No reason to stay, is there?"

One-Eye had reasons. We ignored them.

"Start packing after breakfast," Elmo told us.

"You're going to travel in this weather?" One-Eye demanded.

"Captain wants us back."

I took Soulcatcher a platter of scrambled eggs. I don't know why. He did not eat often, and breakfast never. But he accepted.

I looked out the window. The mob had discovered the change. Someone had brushed the snow off Raker's face. His eyes were open, seemed to be watching. Weird.

Men were scrambling around under the table, fighting over the coins we'd left behind. The pile-up seethed like maggots in a putrid corpse. The crowd was indifferent to the dead Rebel. "Somebody ought to do him honor," I murmured. "He was a hell of an opponent."

"You have your Annals," Soulcatcher told me. And, "Only a conqueror bothers to honor a fallen foe."

I was headed for my own plate by then. I wondered what he meant, but a hot meal was more important at the moment.

XVI

They were all down at the stable except me and Otto. They were going to bring the wagon round for the wounded soldier. I'd given him something to get him through the coming rough handling.

They were taking their time. Elmo wanted to rig a canopy to shield Otto from the weather. I played solitaire while I waited.

Out of nowhere, Soulcatcher said, "She's very beautiful, Croaker. Young-looking. Fresh. Dazzling. With a heart of flint. The Limper is a warm puppy by comparison. Pray you never catch her eye."

Soulcatcher stared out the window. I wanted to ask questions, but none would come at that moment. Damn. I really wasted a chance then.

What color was her hair? Her eyes? How did she smile? It all meant a lot to me when I couldn't know.

Soulcatcher rose, donned his cloak. "If only for the Limper, it's been worth it," he said. He paused at the door, pierced me with his stare. "You and Elmo and Raven. Drink a toast to me. Hear?"

Then he was gone.

Elmo came in a minute later. We lifted Otto and started back to Meystrikt.

The End

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