

EVEN GOBLINS GET THE BLUES



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Edited by CHRISTIANE TRUELOVE

Cover Art by LARRY WILSON

Technical Advisor JACQUELYNN CUNLIFFE, PHD

This is a 3 CHAPTER SAMPLE



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To Sylvia and Ewelina, with love.

To DMH with gratitude, and more.

FOREWORD



As a practicing clinical psychologist, therapist, scientist, and life-long fan of fantasy literature, I am thrilled to pen a foreword to this unusual and highly entertaining book. Never before have I had the pleasure of reading a fantasy novel in which the *hero* is an ethical, highly competent therapist. Therapists are portrayed in most media and literature as either sociopathic murderers, as well-intentioned but totally unethical (e.g. having sexual affairs with patients or their relatives) or, even in the best case scenario, as caring and ethical, but incompetent, outdated and unhelpful in their approach. It is the very rare novel, television show or movie that gets therapy “right.” Delightfully, this book does.

Highly skilled therapists who practice modern, empirically supported, evidence based treatments will recognize themselves and their methods here. Abernathy the Clear treats complex chronic PTSD from childhood trauma, social anxiety, depression, phobias and more. That his patients include goblins, dragons, minotaurs, elves and unicorns, in addition to humans, just adds joy to the successful outcomes.

Abernathy honors therapist-patient confidentiality and privilege (even when doing so requires tremendous moral courage on his part) and is generally careful to avoid unethical multiple relationships that might harm his clients. He puts patient welfare first and makes his fiduciary responsibility to care for the people (and creatures) in his charge his top priority. Skilled in understanding people's motives, he turns to negotiation rather than swordplay whenever possible, often "disarming" his adversaries with clever solutions that allow everyone to avoid conflict. Not that he can't wield a sword (especially a magical one) when necessary, but like any good therapist, he prefers to rely on the power of insight and mediation to get warring parties to stand down without the need for violence.

What's even better is that Abernathy lives in a complex yet entirely believable fantasy world. Patrick Rodgers brings his love of different cultures, music, food and traditions to life, inventing myriad societies, histories, mythologies and civil systems that feel real and possible. Abernathy's world is fully developed, rich and intriguing. The magic itself is also fun. Speaking stones that allow one to understand foreign tongues, consulting room couches that magically adjust to the size and shape of every client, alchemical concoctions that can be used to temporarily incapacitate an enemy, all add delightful details that move the story forward. Even more important, Rodgers weaves in important themes that will resonate with most readers – the dangers of xenophobia and racism and the evil they unleash undergird the entire story, making it highly relevant to the modern world.

But! Lest you think the book too serious, let me assure you that the story rockets you along. It is a highly diverting read with just enough sex and mayhem to entertain the most hard core fantasy fan. It also has strong, competent female characters that will delight the most discerning reader, including women who would rather see themselves reflected in a warrior than a damsel in distress.

I have no doubt that this book will delight lovers of the fantasy genre. If it also convinces people who would otherwise resist it that working with a highly skilled and compassionate therapist can change your life for the better, then Rodgers will have done an enormous

Foreword

service to the field and to distressed people (and minotaurs) everywhere.

*Melissa G. Hunt, PhD
Associate Director of Clinical Training
Department of Psychology
University of Pennsylvania*

*Philadelphia, PA
October 29, 2019*

THE OGRE'S BREATH WAS hot and stank of death. He had eaten a turkey not long ago, and some of its bones and feathers were still lodged in his massive, rotten yellow teeth. His nose was pierced by the wrist bone of a well-known knight who had attempted to kill him in his lair. His left hand, pocked with warts and scars, was clenched into a fist. His right hand, missing one finger, rested on the bone-inlaid pommel of his sword, sheathed in a scabbard made of troll hide which hung from his neck by a thick iron chain. Both of his red eyes blazed with anger as he stared at the scrawny human in front of him. The blade made a horrible rasping sound as he began to draw it from its sheath. One swing would cleave the pathetic pale creature in twain.

"Glarb, where's that anger coming from?" The human's voice was even and calm. The ogre paused, the sword halfway out. His eyes narrowed and his rancid breath came more quickly. His left eye flickered open and shut for a few seconds. Then he sighed.

"Maybe you were right. I think I still have some unresolved issues relating to my father." He slumped back in the massive couch, his limp hand absently pushing the sword back in its home. The corners of his eyes began to moisten. The human leaned back slightly in his chair and

took a slow sip of water to give Glarb a moment with his own thoughts. He double checked to make sure there was an ample supply of linen cloths on the simple wooden stand next to the couch.

"Glarb, I'm really proud of you. You've really been working hard at this for the past three months, and I think the insight you gained today is a result of all that effort."

"It's not insight. It's just me finally admitting that you were right." His voice had an almost sullen tone and his gaze had turned away, up to the ceiling.

"I only suggested to you that we should spend more time focusing on your father, but your hard work and self-reflection are what helped you understand how important that is, okay?" Seeing that the ogre was still staring at the ceiling, the man let his gaze flicker briefly to the hourglass that sat next to the cloths. Little sand remained in the top half.

"Between now and our next session, I want you to think about your father. What did you value most in that relationship, and what do you wish you could have changed?"

An anguished cry bellowed forth from Glarb's mouth, tears streaming freely down his weathered cheeks. "I wish I hadn't watched him die in front of me! I wanted to defend him, but I was only a child!" His body became wracked with spasms. "It was a whole party of adventurers. My father could have taken on two, three of them on his own. I saw him do it before. But there were six of them. They had a wizard who shot some kind of magic arrows at him, and I was scared, so scared!" He wept piteously, his body contorting into a fetal position.

"There was nothing you could have done, Glarb. If you hadn't run away, they would have hurt you badly, maybe even killed you. You didn't even have your own sword yet." He offered one of the linen cloths to the ogre, who brushed it aside.

"I wasn't even there when my mother got back from foraging. She had to go into our lair and find my father hacked to pieces on the floor. There was blood everywhere. There was an elf in the group...my father hated elves...so the first thing he did was pick up the elf and smash his head through a wall. His companions left him behind, so my mother got to clean that up, too. And it was almost a day before I gathered the

courage to go back, so that whole time she thought I was dead or captured." The ogre's breath was still ragged but his sobbing had mostly subsided.

The last of the sand in the upper half of the hourglass tumbled down. The human gave an encouraging look, leaning forward in his chair.

"Glarb, our time for today is up. But we clearly have a lot to discuss next time. Now, we can't change what happened in the past, right?" The ogre nodded, wiping his face clean with one of the cloths. "But together we can further examine how you feel about yourself, given your past experiences, and how you choose to let that affect you going forward." He stood.

Glarb shakily rose from the couch. "Thank you so much, Doctor Abernathy."

The human smiled. "You're welcome. Lucinda will see you on the way out." As the ogre departed, Abernathy The Clear made some notes on a parchment and carefully filed it away in a chest of drawers that rested against the far wall. His right hand went absently to his pocket, tapping against the Speaking Stone. Imbued with powerful magic, the stone enabled him to understand any language spoken to him. Further, any words he spoke would be fully comprehensible to anyone within thirty feet of the stone who could hear him. It was his most prized possession.

It had been an exhausting day, even by his standards. Never one to leave a patient in distress, or to shy away from hard work, Abernathy had already seen an orc with abandonment issues, an elven couple whose sex life had gone stale, an aging grue who hadn't eaten an adventurer in five years, a unicorn obsessed with the small size of his horn, a succubus who couldn't stop obsessively washing her face, and a halfling who had accidentally blown off his own hand three months prior while messing around with a wizard's stash of fireworks.

On rare occasion, Abernathy would take on a human patient, but the Speaking Stone gave him the chance to counsel an underserved population. To the best of his knowledge, nobody else in the world was providing talk therapy to anyone, let alone non-humans. Humans tended to be social creatures and typically had other humans to talk to,

but some of Abernathy's clients were very territorial and were likely to fight any others of their kind that they encountered.

Illiteracy was also an issue. The lack of a written language (or an inability to write) prevented some of his patients from being able to record their thoughts or experiences. The inability to read robbed them of the guidance offered by many spiritual and philosophical texts that they might have turned to. While humans in distress could read the *Treatises of The Blue Pontiff* series (religious in nature but not too preachy) or peruse Edrik The Elder's "On Simplicity" books (common sense advice coupled with self-affirmation), orcs had nothing comparable in their scant body of literature, and demand for an orcish translation of these works was minimal at best.

Abernathy's office was, by necessity, rather large. The main entrance consisted of a set of huge double doors, seemingly massive yet made of thin wood panels so as to be less heavy. They were opened and closed by a simple system of weights, pulleys, and gears. His assistant, Lucinda, managed his patients from a room in front of the building designed to look like a plush red velvet tent.

He was a strong advocate of privacy, which is why he picked a sparsely populated neighborhood as a location for his practice. Silverdale was a suburb of Sapphire City, each division boringly named for the geological discoveries that attracted their first settlers. Property in Sapphire City was too expensive, but Silverdale prices were low enough for him to purchase an office that could comfortably fit giants, ogres, unicorns, minotaurs, and all other manner of creatures. Dragons, however, were simply too big to fit, so those patients were always house calls unless they could shape shift, which few could. Abernathy's other recent "house calls" were a mermaid (invariably resulting in his clothes getting wet as he waded in up to his waist), and a treefolk who had been rooted to the same spot for nearly three centuries.

Lucinda had been with him for four years. Previously, she had managed a store for an alchemist who sold simple potions to help fund his purchase of more exotic ingredients for experiments. She was detail-oriented, easily remembered people's names, and had a soothing presence. She had flawless brown skin the color of a lightly toasted

dinner roll, black hair that flowed down to the middle of her back, and hips that were noticeably wider than her waist. She would have easily passed as a normal human but for two features: her eyes had an intensely purple hue to them, and she had a prehensile tail. Protruding from her lower back, the tail's resting position was an upward line followed by a short downward curl, like an upside-down fishing hook. It had a round end, like a cat's tail, but was covered in skin rather than fur.

Abernathy was not the sort of person to ask a creature what its species was, or why it had a particular biological feature, unless it was necessary information to help a patient. Lucinda was not a patient, and as she had never volunteered any details about her tail, Abernathy wasn't entirely sure what her background was. Not that it mattered to him in any case. She excelled at her job and his patients gave her rave reviews. She was also quite adept at mixing a Drowsy Dwarf, a skill that he especially appreciated after an unusually draining session.

There was a smaller "staff only" door that the two of them used during the course of the day, and presently Lucinda came through it after briefly knocking. She seemed exasperated.

"One of Glarb's silver pieces had blood on it again."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I know how much that irritates you." Concern was evident on his face. His features were gentle, in the way of a kindly grandparent but without being spoiled by time. When he spoke, his countenance was very expressive of his words; when he chose to remain silent, he could project the air of a good listener, or if necessary, a blank slate.

"So can we finally put up that sign?" Lucinda had been lobbying for the placement of a sign next to the tent door, advising all patients that coins covered in blood, slime or other fluids would not be accepted. Abernathy feared it might stigmatize those of his patients who frequently saw combat and thus had tarnished money.

"Let's have the sign...but put it on your desk instead. Then it's not confronting patients the whole time that they're waiting out there. They come up to pay you, they see it, they read it, and then it's done."

"Great. I already have the pictographs selected. I'm confident that even the less imaginative ones will be able to make sense of it."

"Good, good. Who do I have next?"

"Reza the Falconer." Abernathy nodded. Reza was one of his few human patients. Abernathy genuinely liked the man, despite some of his less ethical proclivities, which was the main reason he had agreed to treat him in the first place.

"He's usually on time, so I—"

"He's actually already here. Should I send him in?" she asked.

"Give me two minutes to review my notes and then you can send him back."

Lucinda nodded and left, and several minutes later, Reza sauntered in. He had light brown skin and jet black hair, with dark eyes that were constantly in motion, scanning the room. His frame was lithe and he was slightly under average height for a human male; he came eye-to-eye with Abernathy. While the rest of his face was pleasing, his nose had clearly been broken more than once and had healed crookedly. He wore stylish light leather armor, black with gray accents. The right shoulder and forearm were reinforced and well-worn, and perched on his right shoulder was, as one might have expected from his name, a falcon.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Abernathy." Reza extended his hand with a warm smile. Abernathy shook it, returning the smile and gesturing for Reza to sit.

"I thought we had seen each other fairly recently and wasn't expecting to see you for a while yet," Abernathy remarked, scanning his notes.

"True enough. We weren't due to meet again for two more weeks. But I have to talk to someone about this, and there isn't another soul I can trust." Reza's face was intent.

Abernathy nodded. "Of course, Reza. I'm always here if you need to talk."

Reza looked around the room again, then leaned in close. Normally, Abernathy might have been concerned about a bird of prey being so close to his face, but Reza's falcon was incredibly well-trained, and Abernathy had become accustomed to it. Reza spoke in a faint whisper. "I finally got it, Abernathy. The Star of Sindalorn."

"Wait—what?"

"Wait—what' indeed. Well might you ask that! It sounds like a mere boast, I know, but in truth, I managed to acquire the Star of Sindalorn." Reza was grinning with excitement.

"You stole a ring that's famous enough to have a name from one of the wealthiest and most well-connected men in the city? How are you not already dead?" Abernathy asked in disbelief.

"It's genius, my friend. I've been working on this for months. So you know that the Star was a wedding gift from Lord Hurlcott's wife to him?"

"Actually, I didn't. I've just heard the ring mentioned in connection with his name. I always assumed he just bought it."

"He could easily afford it, but no. The Star of Sindalorn had been owned by Lady Hurlcott's family for three generations until she gave it to him as his wedding ring. You hear about how beautiful it is, but until you see it, Doctor...well, words don't do it justice. But no matter. For months now, I've hired a few discreet individuals to spread some bribes around in an effort to dig up dirt on Lord Hurlcott. One of them was given a tip that the noble lord keeps a mistress, a sculptor of modest talent, whom he visits once a week. Can you imagine stepping out with some artist girl when you have Lady Hurlcott waiting in your bedchamber?"

"Well, while physical attraction is important and can play a role, in truth, infidelity often has a number of root causes that—"

"My friend, have you ever seen Lady Hurlcott in person?"

"I have, and yes, she is exceptionally fetching."

"So she is. If she and I wound up in the same bed, only one of us would survive. And I'm not saying it would necessarily be me. No matter. I have also been patronizing the arts myself. Again using discreet intermediaries, I've had a few hungry young men with a gift for the pencil follow the great lord to some of his favorite public haunts. They've each produced several in-depth sketches of the Star."

"Isn't there a rather detailed painting of the happy couple hung up in the lobby of the orphanage they founded?" Abernathy asked.

"Yes, but it only shows the Star from one angle. I have twenty-three sketches of the Star now, from a number of different angles, and each artist has observed some particular detail that the others have missed,

so it was money well spent. No matter. I took the sketches to a jeweler who owed some money to the wrong people, associates of mine, and had him make a mock-up of the Star.”

“Based on sketches made on the sly by some starving artists? I thought you'd acquired the real Star some way. Your forgery will be discovered in a heartbeat.”

“Surely it would,” Reza said with a grin, “if I had not destroyed it.” Abernathy realized that Reza wanted him to feel confused, wanted to impress him with the ingenuity of whatever he had done. Both professionally and personally, he had no issue with that, so he took the bait.

“Why go to all this trouble and expense to create a forgery just to destroy it?”

“The righteous lord visits his mistress at her quarters in the art district. While his financial contributions provide her with a nice studio and comfortable accommodations, let's just say that her security arrangements are vastly simpler than those at Hurlcott Estate. It was not so difficult for me to gain entry while they were trysting. The mistress is most insistent that he removes his wedding ring while they cavort, so I spirited it away to an apartment two blocks away that I had rented. I had sequestered the jeweler there, and he was able to compare his forgery with the Star itself, making quick notes on what needed to be adjusted and changed. Thirty minutes later, I returned the Star to where I had gotten it—and, from the sounds of it, where the young lady was still getting it.”

“That's an impressive display of skill. Yet the whole thing seems needlessly complicated. You stole an extremely expensive piece of jewelry but then returned it, so that you could have a fairly skillful forgery of it made? Why not just steal the real thing and keep it?”

“Why not just cut my own throat and eliminate all the extra steps? Lord Hurlcott could never return home without the Star. He would have to stage a robbery and say that he had been attacked by armed brigands, the ring stolen by force. A huge reward would be offered for the return of the Star. The person caught with it would be killed by a mercenary before the Watch ever found them. And who would buy it? The Star could never be worn in public without eventually being

recognized." Reza's falcon, Noor, stirred slightly at the sound of his raised voice, but did not move.

"Well, since you sat down and told me you had the Star, my first thought was, 'What could he possibly do with it?' so you definitely have me curious."

"I'll tell you, my friend. The jeweler, having now studied the real article closely, was able to use his forgery as a model to make a new piece, a quite realistic reproduction of the Star. I destroyed the old forgery, paid him handsomely, and informed my associates that he had been of good service to me. The next two weeks, I observed the pious lord's goings and comings—" he paused to cough—"but it appeared that everything was as usual. So on the third week, I once again entered the building while Lord Hurlcott was entering his mistress, and switched the forgery with the real Star of Sindalorn."

"Again, it's an impressive display of skill. But why do all of this? You said it would be challenging to find a buyer. And no matter how good the forgery is, it will be discovered eventually."

"Oh, the great Lord already knows he has a forgery. I told him." Abernathy was unable to suppress an expression of genuine disbelief. Reza grinned from ear to ear. "Well, of course, I didn't tell him verbally. Or in person. Or in any fashion that could be connected to me in any way."

"I certainly hope not, for your sake."

"No, Doctor. You know I have a lust for adventure, not a death wish."

"I'm starting to wonder," said Abernathy with genuine concern.

"No, no, I was quite careful, my friend. I hired three different barely literate urchins to write three different parts of a note that I left with the forgery. It pointed out that while Lord Hurlcott could certainly discard the forgery, stage a robbery, and claim that the Star was taken from him by force, it would be far easier to wear the forgery for a short time and make a few modest payments to have the real Star returned to him. In the alternative, the Star could be returned directly to Lady Hurlcott, along with a very detailed accounting of the circumstances under which it had been acquired."

"So the Star...the Star itself is meaningless."

"It's worth more than you and I put together will ever see in our entire lifetimes and I'd be a dead man if you whispered a single word of what I've told you, so I wouldn't call it meaningless. But you're right: the real value of the Star is that my possession of it makes an accusation of infidelity very credible. Of course, because of its intrinsic value, I can also demand a much higher payment for its return that I could if I was just blackmailing someone about an affair."

"Reza, it sounds like you spent a lot of time conceiving, researching, and skillfully executing a careful and complicated plan. Your talents are very impressive. But I think it's important that you ask yourself why you've taken such big risks. This was an endeavor with a number of moving parts, after all."

"If you want big rewards, you have to take big risks. And believe me, my friend, this will be a very big reward."

"There are still ways this could come back on you. And sure, I understand that there's a lot of money involved, and we've talked before about how that's a motivational factor for you. But we've also talked about how your drive to pursue risky endeavors has put your safety and health at risk in the past, and this is clearly another example of that."

"I wish you no offense, Doctor, but I was being very literal when I said there was nobody else I could talk to about this. I didn't come here today so that you could talk me out of this or to explore what motivated me to do this. I honestly just wanted to boast to someone about it."

"Fair enough; it's your time. But you've told me the story, and we've talked about how impressive it is. So why don't we use the rest of your time to talk about why you continue to place yourself in these very risky situations?"

"I'm quite willing to have that conversation with you the next time we meet. But right now, I have an appointment to look at a pair of exquisite daggers that bear a potent enchantment. They're very expensive, but I've recently come into some money, so I thought I'd treat myself." He grinned broadly.

"Fair enough. Just let me point out that you're putting material

things ahead of what might better serve your own well-being. Be careful, Reza."

"I will, Doctor. Thank you. And thank you as always for your confidentiality."

"You're welcome. I'll see you soon."

"You will. Now go do something fun with the rest of my hour." Still smiling, he departed with a flourish. Abernathy had taken very few notes during their conversation. Initially, Reza had demanded at their first meeting that Abernathy take no notes whatsoever, but once he began to trust Abernathy, he permitted him to make short, cryptic notes that were sufficient to jog Abernathy's memory, but that would provide no information to anyone else.

Lucinda came in a short time later. "Reza seems especially happy today."

"He does," Abernathy said in an even tone. "He didn't use his full hour so I'm going to spend a little time reviewing some notes. Check back with me in half an hour?" She nodded and left.

Abernathy was due to see another of his few human patients the next day, and he thought it wouldn't hurt to be especially well prepared. Tepesh Goldan was not someone he considered a friend, but Tepesh sat on the City Council. He had come to Abernathy years ago, when he found himself unable to recover from the untimely drowning death of his beloved younger sister. Abernathy had helped ease his pain, and Tepesh became a believer in Abernathy's methods. On the few occasions that there had been problems with the city regarding Abernathy's most unusual clientele, Tepesh had intervened behind the scenes. The men were mutually grateful to each other.

Lately Tepesh had become increasingly suspicious that his wife, Andrea, had been having an affair. Abernathy had met the woman once, for less than five minutes, at a social occasion. He had no objective way of guessing whether the affair was real or the product of Tepesh's fears. That's why he wanted to review the notes, to be certain that every detail Tepesh had shared with him would be fresh in his mind. He again considered each piece of information but found himself still unable to form even a rough opinion. There was simply not enough information to go on.

Of greater concern was the toll that the "affair," if it existed or not, had been taking on Tepesh. He found it difficult to find joy in things that normally pleased him. He was eating much less, and sleeping much more. He found it a struggle to get out of bed in the morning. These were clear warning signs to Abernathy, who had to find a way to treat the symptoms despite the uncertainty surrounding their underlying cause.

Lucinda returned in due course. "Are you ready?" she asked with a small smile.

"Yes, who do I have next?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't remember?"

"Well, no. That's why I'm so lucky to have you in my employ." It was part compliment but part impatience to proceed.

"According to your schedule, your next item is your late lunch...meeting with Helgi Pureblood, the statuesque woman you met at the stables." The eyebrow remained arched and she deliberately smirked.

"Oh, yes. Yes, that's right. Excellent!" Abernathy moved to begin his end-of-day routine, clearing up his office, packing up his patient notes. Lucinda stopped him.

"I've seen you do this plenty of times. I can take care of it."

"I know you can. But doing this is helpful to me. I think about each patient and I put them in a box in my mind, more or less, so that I can have a restful evening with no thoughts about my workday intruding."

"My advice is to use this time to get to your...meeting ahead of schedule. Women appreciate a man who arrives on time." The smirk became, if such a thing were possible, even smirkier, but Abernathy missed it.

"Wise counsel, Lucinda. Thanks. I'm off, then." He paused at his desk and took a modest set of leather bracelets with brass inlays to accent his clothes. He had come to understand that while not ugly, he was not strikingly handsome, and therefore a little effort spent on packaging was time well spent. He was about an inch shorter than an average man, with black eyes, stubble that never seemed to become a beard, and short dark hair. He believed that physical fitness was important to mental health, so to model this for his patients, he main-

tained a physique that was lean but with some definition, like a swimmer.

He favored monocolored attire, perhaps with a splash of color from an accessory. He avoided white as he did not care for the way it looked against his light pink skin. His ensemble was not especially creative, but it was of fine quality, suitable for someone of the upper middle class. Today he wore a burgundy tunic with black trousers, an unusual deviation from his usual preferences. He hoped that it would please Helgi. Setting aside thoughts of work, he left his office for the day.

“**T**he Realm of Tiber is unique in the history of the world. Even during the Age of Legend, there was no description of a nation-state in our physical dimension whose sitting ruler was a genuine god. In the tale of the Attack of the Twelve Horsemen, which itself harkens to the Age of Legend, there is a reference to a stolen vase which depicts ‘The Goddess Muranda, sitting on her throne in Caiban, while her citizens come to her seeking justice.’ But the last worshippers of Muranda are thought to have abandoned her or died out some six centuries ago, so asking the goddess to verify the veracity of this depiction is unlikely to yield results. Why the god Tiber chooses to live among us is something of a mystery as well, perhaps because nobody has had the temerity to question him on the subject.”—The Annals of Tycolos

LIKE ALMOST EVERY other schoolboy from almost every other culture that his people would consider “civilized,” Abernathy spent his seventh year of general education primarily studying *The Annals of Tycolos*, an encyclopedic work relentlessly authored by an elf of the same name, over the course of nearly one hundred and thirty years.

Tycolos had intended the work to be a travelogue of his exhaustive

journeys around the world, but he included a level of personal detail that made it part diary as well. He was tireless in explaining the details of how each particular local dish affected his bowels, which is why many students would refer to the text as *The Annals of Tycolos* when no adults were in earshot. Great thinkers regarded it as both an ethnography of other societies as well as an autobiography of sorts, which meant that for educators, it was a dual-purpose text to teach. Unfortunately, the *Annals* suffered from a gaping hole: they were horrendously outdated. Tycolos had published each of the 37 volumes sequentially, as they were finished, roughly one every three or four years. By the time the tenth volume had come out, some information in the first volume had become glaringly inaccurate. When the final volume was released, the first text was one hundred and twenty-eight years old.

The elf stubbornly refused to revise a word of his master work, insisting that it was a full and true accounting of his experiences and not intended to be a schoolboy's primer on the current state of the world. But there was no other single work quite like it, and thus it was taught to children, some of whom later became educators. In the absence of a more accurate text, they felt obliged to teach it by rote, and the cycle continued. Even the final volume of the series was forty years old by the time Abernathy had studied the *Annals*.

As students will do, some questioned the value of studying a collection of information so riddled with outdated references. Most educators generally took a dim view of such questions, insisting that the *Annals* were a work without peer. Abernathy had a classmate, a pale girl with hair the color of strawberries and the sturdy build of a farmer's daughter. She was devastatingly brilliant and was given to the sharpest kind of sarcasm, a combination that prevented him from ever gathering the courage to pursue his crush on her. For her seventh-year-end presentation, she had given an entire twenty-minute talk on how, as Tycolos had written, their society should be constantly vigilant for any sign of aggression from the Kingdoms of The Inner Sea, an aggregation of warlike and aggressive tribes. Nearly thirty years ago, the Kingdoms had been devastated by a kind of pox that was spread by fish. Over half the population died and the society devolved into near-chaos. Two nearby kingdoms annexed the remaining territories in a

bloodless coup, installed puppet leaders, and sent their own people to live there. The Kingdoms of the Inner Sea ceased to exist in name, and their people had no more taste for war; so it had been for three decades. Her entire presentation was a direct mockery of the *Annals*. She was led away by a red-faced instructor the moment she finished speaking.

Abernathy went looking for her during the meal break. He found her behind bales of hay that were stored for archery practice, welts covering her arms and legs, her face streaked with tears. He felt suddenly hot, filled with anger, frustration, and for reasons he couldn't understand, shame.

"Priscilla, I'm so sorry they did this to you. It's wrong. It's horrible." He'd never said three sentences in a row to her before. She was sitting on the ground, arms wrapped around her knees, hugging herself.

"Everything hurts," she wept.

"It looks like it hurts. I thought your presentation was very clever. You made a good point. And they beat you for it. What kind of message does that send?" he asked, genuinely uncertain of the answer.

"I don't understand why I'm supposed to memorize what some old elf wrote about some part of the world that doesn't exist anymore, when there are so many things happening now that I need to know about." Short sobs still punctuated her sentences, each one of them like a punch to Abernathy's midsection.

"The *Annals* still have some good parts, but that's not what matters. You made your point in a really clever way, but instead of having a smart reply, they just beat you, because they're bigger and stronger than we are. They're supposed to know more than we do, and they should have been able to make a better argument. But they couldn't, because you're smarter than most of them."

She started laughing, still wincing and cradling herself in pain. "You're just saying that to get me to stop crying."

"No," he replied earnestly, "I mean it. I've always known you were brilliant. But what you did today was—well, you won. You got one over on them. That's why they had to beat you, you know. They had to prove that they're still in charge of you, of all of us."

"Well, they were definitely angry. I thought Professor Salus was

going to lose an eye. That vein on his forehead was throbbing like it was going to cause an explosion." Abernathy laughed, and she laughed with him. He lost all sense of being hungry and spent the meal break consoling her. When the bell rang, she grabbed his hand suddenly.

"You're a good listener, Abernathy. You're a good talker, too." His face flushed bright red and as if to give lie to the compliment, he found himself with nothing to say. "Well, anyway—thank you for making me feel better."

They talked again many times after that and soon became a couple. The relationship ended amicably, but painfully, when Abernathy's parents sent him on to the more intense environment of secondary education, and her family, down on its luck, kept her home full time to help out on the farm.



ABERNATHY WALKED FOR TWENTY MINUTES, enjoying the mild climate and a slight breeze. As he turned a corner, he barely missed stepping into a small pile of horse manure. Although he had never been there before, he found the Flaming Fox tavern with little difficulty. Atop the entrance was a large sign with the name of the establishment. The letters were painted to look as if they were on fire, set ablaze by a depiction of a fox breathing fireballs. Although it was still only the afternoon, it sounded like the tavern had a lively crowd.

Abernathy stepped inside and looked around, seeing a number of boisterous patrons and a few in various stages of inebriation. A stout and sour-looking dwarf sat on a tall chair at the entrance, looking closely at Abernathy as he entered, before returning to keeping an eye on the tavern.

"You're quite punctual," said an unusually deep female voice in his ear. He turned around to find Helgi Pureblood standing behind him. She was tall enough that had she stood on an apple, she would have been just shy of six feet (but terribly off-balance since apples are small). The skin on her face was taut, and she had two small scars, one above her right brow and a very thin one that went from the bottom of her

lower lip to the bottom of her chin. Despite that, her countenance was quite appealing; she had chiseled features and expressive black eyes. Abernathy especially appreciated her mouth, which naturally rested in a position that made her lips seemed slightly pursed, as if she was in constant disapproval of everything around her. He found it endearing. Her color was pink to red in the manner of someone who spent a good deal of time in the sun and her hair was a very dark blonde. She had a sturdy frame with a small bosom, athletic arms and thighs that seemed powerful. Her elbows were always slightly bent, with her hands resting just above her hips.

"I have to stick to a fixed schedule every day, so I do my best to be on time," he said, looking up at her with a smile.

Helgi didn't smile back. "Well, I'm pleased that you're here. Let's have a drink to bury the cares of the day," she said. Abernathy nodded and followed her to the bar. The bartender's smock was a collage of stains from various types of alcohol, but he had a broad grin and a welcoming tone in his voice.

"What can I serve you fine folks this afternoon?"

Abernathy began to consider his options, but Helgi said, "We'll have two Flaming Foxes."

"Excellent choice; coming right up!"

"I've never heard of that drink," said Abernathy.

"It's a house specialty. The flavor is pleasant enough, I suppose, but the aftertaste is...well, you'll see." Now there was almost the hint of a smile on her lips. Abernathy took note of her clothes, very similar to how she was dressed when they first met: a leather coat atop a cloth outfit that seemed to be accentuated by more leather in spots. The color scheme was various shades of dark brown, although she wore a red scarf and several pieces of jewelry with red stones.

"So, how is your horse?" asked Abernathy.

"He is well; thank you for asking. We had a short day of riding, so he also has some time for play this afternoon."

"How long have you had him?"

"For all of his life. My people bond with our horses from the time of their birth."

"That's fascinating," said Abernathy. "You must be very fond of him."

"It goes well beyond that. The horse is an extension of me. To lose him would be like losing my legs."

"I've been in this general area before, but never to this tavern. Why did you pick this place in particular?" he asked.

Her fingers tapped idly on the bar. "The drinks are good, and the prices reasonable. But mostly I come for the music. There are several talented bards that perform here. In not so long, you'll hear one for yourself."

"I'm already looking forward to it." Just then, the bartender arrived with the drinks.

"Here you are, then. Enjoy!" Abernathy thanked him; Helgi nodded politely.

"Shall we toast?" asked Abernathy.

"Yes, let's do that. To success in all things."

"And to new companions," he added. They touched glasses and began to drink.

The flavor of the drink was not unpleasant to Abernathy, although it had a sharpness to it that signaled its strength. Helgi seemed to be watching him drink. After two mouthfuls, he set the drink, still two thirds full, on the bar. His tall companion held onto hers, half empty, still watching him. Her eyes were deep, dark pools, and he believed that if he were not careful, he might one day drown in them. What secrets di—FIRE! FIRE!! BURNING FIRE!!!

His throat and mouth were suddenly blazing. He had a quick moment of panic before reasoning that no tavern would serve anything that would kill him. He focused on his breathing. The residue of the drink continued to sear him, bringing a little water to his eyes, but he knew logically that it could not last forever. He set his gaze upon Helgi, casually, and drew breath through his nose, holding it in, being aware of it, and slowly releasing it through his mouth. It seemed like an hour, but it was barely a minute and a half before he spoke.

"Well, I'm awake now," he offered.

She smiled. "That's why I like it. Even after a long day, I feel it

invigorates me. Although the sensation takes a bit of getting used to. You seemed to handle it very well for a first-timer."

Two elves came in, a couple by the looks of it, both willowy and graceful. They sat at a small table near the tavern's tiny stage, and not long after that, the barmaid arrived at their table with drinks. Abernathy supposed they must be regular customers.

"You were not born Abernathy The Clear, I think," Helgi said, in a way that made it a question.

"No. I was born Abernathy Silversmith. But my father hated smithing and had quit that work by the time he was fourteen. He wound up cleaning floors in a Temple of Talis, and they let him use their library in exchange."

"What kind of wage is that? You can't eat a book," she said disapprovingly.

"Well, he was still young. He was living with my grandparents."

"Fourteen is too old to be living with parents."

"Fourteen is still fine where I'm from. Sixteen would be too old. But, since he didn't have to worry about where his next meal would come from, he was able to immerse himself in books. And ultimately, that wound up earning him a good wage."

"Did he become a scholar?" Helgi played with her hair in a way that would seem like flirtation coming from most other women, but Abernathy could tell that it was merely an absent-minded habit for her.

"Not exactly. A bit closer to a judge. He became fascinated by the intricacies of Talisian religious law. He worked for a senior priest as a cross between a scribe and an assistant. He would ask questions about whatever he'd been assigned to do, and fortunately the priest indulged that behavior."

"Fortunate indeed. When I've paid someone for work, I expect them to do it, not to question me about it."

Abernathy smiled. "Most other Talisian priests would have the same thought, from what I know of them. But this priest discovered quickly that my father had a sharp mind, and a keen understanding of complicated and sometimes contradictory rules. He was also an avid reader of history. To make a long story short, my father ultimately

became the High Arbiter for a fairly large Talisian Dominion. And he wound up being very well paid."

"What does that mean, exactly... High Arbiter?"

"If there was a dispute about religious doctrine or law that could not be settled, and if it was important enough, it would be brought before my father. He would apply his knowledge, as well as conduct new research, and finally prepare his official opinion and send it on to the Grand Cleric so that the matter could be decided."

"It's not something I would take any interest in," Helgi said, "but it sounds like your father enjoyed the work. And as you say, he was well paid. So why did you not follow in his footsteps?"

Abernathy gave a half shrug. "I guess at some point, early on, I thought that I would. I mean, I knew my father had turned away from what his father had done, so I never felt any pressure to do what he was doing. He had a lot of books at home and I read some of them, sometimes. But it was all about...I don't want to say 'forcing' people, necessarily, but it was about regulating what people did, sometimes based on something that had been written three hundred years ago by someone who lived a thousand miles away."

"And you think people should be free to do as they wish?" Helgi arched an eyebrow, and he wasn't sure if the question was a challenge.

"For the most part, yes. Well, to clarify, people should be able to do what they want if it's safe for them and doesn't hurt anyone else."

She gestured at a stout man, sitting alone at a table, his head cradled in his arms. His body language immediately identified him as being very drunk. "What about him?" she asked. "Should he be free to keep drinking?"

"He should be free to, yes. I'm not sure how we would stop him. But that doesn't mean it's in his best interest to do it. It's clearly not good for him."

"And what about laws? How are the rules that govern this city different from Talisian laws?" She looked at him intently and he felt himself about to squirm in his seat. He banished the thought and held still.

"Generally, societies can't function without laws. In most human societies, basic laws tend to be very simple and important: don't kill

other people, don't take things that don't belong to you; that sort of thing. In contrast, my father once had to settle a matter by determining what time of day a particular person had eaten a fish—two hundred years ago. It's really quite intricate and complex."

Helgi motioned the barkeep for another drink. Abernathy fervently hoped that he would not be expected to have the same thing again.

"More than half of our laws concern horses," she said, "and we have few in comparison to Sapphire City. In a way, I think of my people as more free. But our clan chiefs also have broad powers, so in some cases, knowing the right people is more important than following the rules."

"Oh, it's the same way here," Abernathy said with a laugh. "I was almost thrown out of this city once, and a second time a lieutenant of the Watch threatened to have my throat cut as I slept in the middle of the night. But not long after that, I was able to discreetly help someone in a position of power, and since then, I've been left alone to do my work."

"This is what fascinates me about you," she said enthusiastically. "You explained it a bit when we met at the stable, but I'm still not sure I understand it. People come to talk to you and they pay you, yes?"

"It's more than that, but yes, that's right."

"They seek your advice, then?"

"Well, in a sense, yes, but I prefer to help them reach their own decisions. I try not to give advice if I can help it, unless it's something really obvious or if there is behavior involved that is very likely to cause harm."

"Like what?" she asked.

Abernathy gestured to the drunken man they had just talked about. "If I talked to him, I would definitely encourage him to stop drinking so much."

"I would give him the same advice, but nobody pays to hear me talk."

"I would," he replied playfully. She gave a half smile, an expression that seemed somewhat rare for her, which made Abernathy quite satisfied. "But I have to do more than just tell him to stop drinking so much. I have to talk to him about why he drinks. What is it that drives him to

do this to himself? Is it to protect himself from painful thoughts and feelings that he tries to bury in alcohol? Once he understands why he is doing it, then I have to talk to him about those root causes. Then we talk about ways that he can better cope with those basic issues."

"Does all that talking make any difference? My intention is not to offend; I am genuinely curious."

"It does. I've successfully treated many people who had problems with drinking, smoking strong herbs, indulging in various alchemical concoctions, or other destructive behavior like infidelity or high-risk adventuring. I also help people with other problems, like low self-worth, grief over the loss of a loved one, or marital difficulties."

"Again, not to offend, but why would a stranger speak to you about what is between him and his wife?"

"Well, it's partly because I *am* a stranger. Most of the people that I treat are not people that I otherwise know. And it's also because I protect my patients' confidentiality at all costs. That's part of the reason that people are willing to pay me: they know that they can trust me to keep their secrets."

Helgi shook her head. "I believe what you're saying; I just can't imagine in my head how it all works."

Abernathy smiled. "That's what every new patient says to me. Well, actually, some of them say they *don't* believe what I'm saying. But the majority of them soon come to trust me."

Helgi gave him another intense look. "Should I trust you, Abernathy the Clear?" He was unprepared for the question and it took him a second or two to automatically put on his neutral facial expression as he searched for something to say.

"Are you coming to my office for an appointment?" She kept looking at him with no reply, something like the hint of a frown beginning to form at the left corner of her mouth. Though they sat in a boisterous and loud room, Abernathy could only hear the silence that blanketed their conversation. He resisted the urge to clear his throat nervously.

"Well...yes, I suppose you can. I mean...yes. You can trust me, Helgi." Her expression did not change, but he could tell that she had relaxed her posture very slightly. Mercifully, the arrival of the second

round of drinks broke the tension in the air: two ales, no Flaming Foxes. Helgi drank slowly, looking away at the elven couple. Finally she turned back to him.

"I think perhaps I can trust you. But that remains to be seen." Abernathy tried to suppress his smile. By her words, she'd told him that he'd passed the test of their first meeting, and that there would be others to follow. He started to say something, but Helgi had turned her gaze away from him again.

"See who approaches now?" she asked. He turned to see what she was looking at. Making her way through the tables toward the stage was a woman clad in a white tabard that was girded around her waist with a fine blue cord, tied at the hip. Her hair was short in the back, but her front locks covered her forehead and ended just above her eyes. Through one of the side gaps in her tabard, Abernathy observed what looked like an indentation or groove from just below her shoulder to just above the hip. Part of her breast peeked out of the gap as well, but it seemed she was wearing something that covered the front part of her bosom. She carried a small lyre that looked fairly common, yet she carried it with all of the tenderness that a parent cradles a newborn.

"Is that one of the bards you know?" he asked.

Helgi nodded. "She is named Hayaa; her people use only one name. They live very far from this place, so their style of music is seldom heard here, or even known of. It typically begins with a subject that conveys hope, like a festival day or a wedding. Then it becomes more tragic, until finally it seems all is lost and there is no hope. The song usually becomes very slow and quiet for a time, until finally it races back to life."

"How did you learn so much about music?" he asked, genuinely impressed.

"After horses, music is my second passion. Even a street urchin with a pennywhistle brightens my day. But to hear a practiced consort of musicians, or a truly talented bard, opens up my mind and spirit in ways that I have no words to describe. It elevates me above my concerns and my...myself, for a short time." Her face was somewhat flushed and she looked as if she'd said more than she intended.

"There isn't as much music in my life as I'd like, but I do enjoy it when I'm around it. Do you play any instruments?" he asked.

She shook her head, not making eye contact. "That is not among my talents, sadly."

Just that moment came the strumming of a lyre, one note repeated, and the patrons began to turn toward the stage. Conversations began to quiet down a bit, but stopped entirely after the bartender shouted something, and a bright light suddenly illuminated the stage. Abernathy could see a long, thin stone that had been mounted just under the top of the tavern's ceiling, above the stage, now bathing the area with bright, white rays. Magic of that sort was not uncommon, although it was not something that an average man could readily afford.

Abernathy could now see that the bard had an olive complexion, and pleasing features, although her lips were very thin. She did not address the audience nor even acknowledge them, staring down at the stage several feet in front of her shoes. She began to play, her voice surprisingly loud, the tune from her lyre steady but slowly becoming more boisterous. Abernathy snuck a glance at Helgi, but she was fixated on the bard.

The woman's voice was delicate and high, but very emotive. She sang about two brothers and a sister who grew up, married, and had children, who then had children of their own. The family was large and over time some of them traveled. They kept in touch with regular messages, and every three years on the Brightest Day, family members would gather together with the others nearest to them and watch as the Spear Point, now visible even during the day, crossed the sky to align with the sun. The star, seemingly joined with the sun, covered them in a bright light that was almost pink as they danced, sang, ate food, and reminisced. The audience seemed increasingly pleased by the tale, smiling and nodding their heads, entranced by the singer's voice.

The time came when the eldest brother was in poor health, his condition growing worse by the day. He sent messages to all the family members asking them to come to his home for a final reunion. For some, the trip would be long and he feared that they would not arrive

before he passed on. So sad was the tale and so mournful was Hayaa's voice that Abernathy felt himself standing at the precipice of a well of sorrow, and he instinctively began to focus on his breathing, slowing the beating of his heart. He thought about how the tavern chair felt beneath him, how he could still taste the drink in his mouth, how Helgi's scent barely masked the typical tavern smells of unwashed people and soured ale.

As the song grew more tragic, it became more challenging for him to maintain his composure. He thought briefly about meditating more deeply and blocking out the song, but he realized that this was something Helgi had wanted him to experience with her. Finally it came to a bitter conclusion, and he felt a heavy, dark weight pressing down on his head and shoulders. Then the lyre came gently to life again, and the bard added a joyous postscript to the tale. Abernathy felt a wash of joy and relief come over him.

He was genuinely moved, but looking around the room, he could tell that almost everyone else had experienced something more profound. Faces were streaked with tears, some still sobbed gently, but while their posture had been slumped, almost defeated, just two minutes ago, now they sat upright again. All of them seemed to radiate joy and hope; even those who cried still had smiles on their faces. The applause was thunderous.

He pivoted to look at Helgi but her face was turned away. He thought about saying something but held his tongue. After a few moments, she wiped a hand over her face quickly, then turned back to him, not making eye contact.

"What did you think about the performance?" she asked in a slow, even tone.

"It was very powerful," he answered. "Her voice is amazing and she's clearly talented with her instrument."

"Nothing more?"

He fished for the words that would satisfy her query. "Her storytelling ability is strong. She knows how to write in a way that moves her audience."

Helgi hadn't looked up at him yet. "Thank you for joining me for this." Her voice had become flat. She drank more, then looked at him.

Abernathy couldn't shake the feeling that he'd failed some kind of test. The bard appeared to have finished her short break and was tuning up her lyre for a second song.

"Do all her songs follow the same kind of cycle?" he asked.

"Mostly, yes. The entire performance is modeled in the same fashion. As you see, everyone feels quite happy at the end of that first song, but by the midway point of the show, the songs will end with tears and heartache. Then at the end of the performance, everyone will be made new again."

Just at that moment, Abernathy saw something from the corner of his eye that caught his attention. He turned and saw Lucinda hastily making her way between tables and in front of patrons, heading in his direction. She reached them out of breath, her words ragged as they spilled out of her.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, but the City Watch has called for your help. There's been an attack of some kind and someone has been badly hurt."

"You're not that kind of doctor, are you?" asked Helgi.

"I'm not, no. Did they tell you nothing more, Lucinda?"

She shook her head. "They were vague with the details but very clear on the fact that you were needed immediately."

Abernathy stood. "I've had a wonderful time with you today. I sincerely apologize for having to cut this short, but it's an emergency. I hope we can do this again."

"It is never wise to refuse the authorities. I wish you good fortune. Let us meet again, then."

He smiled. "I'm looking forward to it already." Lucinda tapped his arm gently. "Until next time," he said. He stepped away with Lucinda right behind him. The bard's second song began, and several patrons were visibly irritated as the pair weaved their way through the crowd, heading for the exit.

“The Baeldish people have long suffered the reprobation of other human tribes. The goblin blood that entered their lineage during the Age of Conflict did not come about from gentle interbreeding but rather from repeated and systemic predations against Baeldish citizens from goblin raiding parties. Centuries later, when the Principality of Baeldan and the twin City-States of Hasther and Redbluff were united by conquest as the Kingdom of Marcius, traces of goblin physical features were not uncommon among the Baeldish. The reign of Marcius I was understandably marked by tension between the Baeldish in the East and the former City-States in the West. By the time of his grandson’s reign, in the vernacular of Western Marcius, the only remaining terms for Baeldish people were slurs; even the term “Baeldish” itself had fallen out of usage. A weak ruler, Marcius III failed to defuse the tension, even when masked militiamen from the West began a concerted campaign of terror against the Baeldish. The Red Masks, garbed as their name would suggest, demanded that Marcius be “no home for half breeds.” One winter night, The Red Masks burnt down a Baeldish barn, not realizing that an entire family had bedded down inside with the animals to escape the cold. It was said that the civil war began when the first child’s corpse was pulled from the ashes. When Marcius III sent royal troops to put down the Baeldish uprising, the Baeldish decided to bolster their numbers

Even Goblins Get The Blues

with mercenaries. In an ironic twist of fate, the only mercenaries willing to fight against Marcius for a price the Baeldish could afford were goblins. In the ensuing conflict, Redbluff was razed almost entirely, the Hastherites were driven into exile as their city became permanently occupied by goblins, and Marcius III was deposed. The Kingdom was dissolved and the Principality of Baeldan was re-established. Reliant on trade with Hasther and grateful for their liberation, the Baeldish began an era of more peaceable relations with the goblins, and any interbreeding that followed was done entirely on a voluntary basis.” —The Annals of Tycolos

SAPPHIRE CITY WAS A CITY-STATE, free and beholden to no kingdom. It sat near a cluster of mines that had given the city its name, and it had abundant timber in Grayson's Forest. A nearby river and a small lake ensured access to clean water. Game was plentiful and the climate was moderate.

Knowing that the mines and timber would eventually run out, the city's twelfth Prime Councilor declared that he would invest heavily in establishing stronger trade routes. His successor followed in his footsteps, and Sapphire City gradually turned into a powerful center of commerce. Many different cultures and species established trade outposts, and while there were several issues at first, everyone eventually settled down and focused on their profits.

Some traders preferred to set up shop at the furthest edge of town, hoping to catch foreigners who were afraid to enter the city, offering them a quick deal and a poor price. Others had touts, usually small and non-threatening young lads (or occasionally, very attractive women), who would wait at each of the city gates and offer to personally guide potential trade partners back to their employer's premises. Galin Greyheart built a tavern next to his trading house and stocked it with exotic drinks and agreeable young women and men. He made the drinks very expensive to keep away the locals, but offered generous discounts at the tavern to anyone who traded with him. His Fair Trade Tavern became a landmark for those visiting or passing through Sapphire City, and he became quite wealthy.

Despite the city's reputation for coexistence, there were still a few

housing enclaves that were restricted by race, all humans-only except for a lone elves-only neighborhood. Any being, in theory, could ascend to the position of Prime Councilor, but of the 26 Prime Councilors in the city's history, only one had been non-human: Gondriel Leaf-Crown, an elf who had great wisdom and knowledge of the intricacies of trade. The business of the city was conducted in Standard, the most commonly used human language, and its laws were based mostly on human treatises such as *Rules For Common Good And Order* by Harold of the Black Stone. Sapphire City could be a bit daunting for non-humans, although the city constantly worked to improve this.

The City Watch handled matters of crime and punishment, while the City Guard was of a military nature, standing vigilant against any external threat. Why the City Watch would summon Abernathy was a mystery to him. As soon as they were outside, he asked if Lucinda knew anything else she hadn't wanted to say in front of other people. She shook her head, still winded.

"They were tight-lipped," she gasped. They turned a corner quickly and almost collided with an old woman selling vegetables from a rickety cart.

"We're sorry!" Lucinda called out as they rushed past. "The nearest Watch station has a horse ready for you, and two outriders to clear the way for you."

"How far to the station?"

"No more than ten minutes away if we keep this pace." She had a hand pressed against her side and was visibly wet with perspiration. Her tail drooped.

"You're exhausted. I can probably find it on my own."

She kept moving. "You know there's no chance of that, right?" She managed a pained smirk.

"You could give me the directions." He wondered if his own tunic was already stained with sweat.

"It's faster just to take you there." They moved in relative silence, punctuated only by heavy breathing, muttered curses, and several more apologies to people who crossed their paths.

The Watch station was situated at a three-way intersection, facing a barber shop and a cobbler's store. An especially large brown horse

with no rider and a heavily polished black saddle stood outside, flanked by two riders atop horses draped in cloth that bore the heraldry of the Watch.

"Is this him, then?" one of the riders asked Lucinda.

"Yes," she gasped, struggling to help Abernathy climb atop the brown steed. He pulled himself up the rest of the way and she stooped over, pressing both hands against her sides, gasping for breath.

"Right, then," said the rider. "Follow us, no more than three lengths behind. Don't let the horse rush ahead, or he'll be trampling people."

Abernathy nodded. "Let's go." The two outriders started forward, scanning ahead for anything that might slow them down.

"Go inside and sit down!" he called to Lucinda, before nudging his mount forward. She waved him on dismissively. He instantly came to realize that this horse was not like others he had ridden before. He could feel the raw power in the animal's body, and there was an almost palpable sense of purpose in its movements. It was large, yes, but there was a level of strength that was disproportionate even taking that into account.

The outriders picked up the pace, calling out ahead, demanding that people clear the way. When their path was straight, Abernathy was relatively comfortable, but when they had to make sharp turns, reducing his field of vision, his heart raced. He fervently hoped that nobody would be run over by the Watch just to facilitate his quick passage.

They got stalled in front of a temple where a small crowd had recently ended a service. Abernathy wasn't entirely certain that his mount would slow down, but the horse did so before he could guide it. A flurry of curses from the outriders scattered the crowd, sullen and indignant, and his horse began to move again.

Abernathy noticed that they were entering Golden Heights, an elite enclave of the city populated by the wealthy and important. Normally there was an increased City Watch presence in this area, but now it almost seemed as if the Watch outnumbered the normal people. Gates to residences were all shut and barred, many with guards out front, weapons unsheathed and in their hands.

They turned a corner and the horses came to a stop. There was a

large knot of people gathered at the front gate of a relatively small piece of land that nevertheless boasted a rather high tower. The two outriders dismounted and came to help him down. They brought him to the City Watch officer that seemed to be in charge of the scene at the gate.

"One of you take him straight in to Captain Honnel," he said briskly, then returned to his work, not even acknowledging Abernathy. The taller of the outriders started in to the house and Abernathy followed quickly. Both of them narrowly avoided bumping into an alabaster-skinned Seluvian who was in just as much of a hurry to leave. Abernathy, who had stepped on the man's robes, offered an apology. Seluvians who wore the robes were keeping their feet out of sight, because they never quite touched the ground, a well-known fact that still managed to unnerve some people who saw it in person. They could not float, but the soles of their feet were always above the ground by just the height of a few stacked coins. They did not leave footprints nor did the weight of their steps crush leaves or snap twigs.

The outrider started up a spiral staircase and Abernathy briefly hoped that his destination was not the top; he guessed the tower to be six stories high. Mercifully, on the second floor they went down a short hallway and came to a room with a small crowd of people both inside and at the entrance.

"Excuse me, coming through," said the outrider in a voice both apologetic yet firm. Abernathy followed closely in his wake as people parted to let him past. There was a strong sense of fear, and everyone's body language was tense. As he entered the room, he guessed it to be a study of some kind. There was a large desk made of a vibrant cherry wood, scroll racks and book cases, several large maps on the walls, a portrait of a rather attractive human female and another of a young boy holding a cat...and, Abernathy suddenly noticed, a message of some kind smeared all over one wall in what might have been blood.

"Captain Honnel, sir!" barked the outrider. "This is Abernathy The Clear." The man who turned in response was built like a tree stump. He was a full foot shorter than Abernathy and twice as thick. He had arms that looked like legs, and his legs were so large that Abernathy had a brief image of him yoked to a plow and pulling it with ease.

Although it was harder to tell through his uniform and armor, there seemed to be little fat, if any, on his body. He had a thick red beard and squinty eyes.

"Well done, and dismissed," he said curtly. The outrider saluted and left quickly. "Thank you for coming so quickly, Doctor Abernathy. I was told to send for you at once. I hope you weren't in the middle of anything urgent."

"Not urgent, no. But I confess, I'm not sure why I'm here."

"What I'm about to tell you will be common knowledge on the street tomorrow, but for right now we're trying to keep it quiet. No doubt you noticed the message on the wall?"

"I can't quite make it out from here, but yes."

"Proximity won't make it much clearer, I fear...well, not to the rest of us, not yet. It was found by one of the kitchen maids when she brought in some wine and a cheese plate to the occupant of this study, Mister Cuthbert Icedale." The Icedale family had been titans of banking in Sapphire City for generations, and besides being wealthy himself, Cuthbert could make or break the fortunes of many other people in the city.

"Mister Icedale was found slumped over his desk, froth coming from his mouth and a brown discharge oozing from his nose. He was alive but unresponsive. A cleric was sent for, but unfortunately, the victim died before his arrival."

"It sounds like poison would be the first guess?" Abernathy asked.

"So it would seem. But the kitchen staff said he hadn't taken any food in several hours—that's why they were bringing up the cheese tray. There was no other food in the room. The pitcher of water and the glass he was drinking from have both been tested and neither contains poison. If it was indeed poison, it was either something very slow-acting that he was exposed to some time ago, or there's a small chance that someone in the room with him physically administered the dose."

"Was there anyone in the house with him?"

"There shouldn't have been. The majordomo says no visitors or tradesmen were present, only the family and normal household retainers. So if anyone was here, they made it past the guards and the rest of the people in the house without being noticed."

"I'm sure whoever told you to fetch me must be aware of the fact that I'm not the type of doctor that can cure poisoning."

"I'm aware. There are two reasons that you're here. The first is the message on the wall. We can't tell quite what it's written in. It's a little dark to be blood and has no scent of copper. It's not excrement. But it seems that somebody took this substance and smeared it on their hands in order to scrawl out those words. That's the first bit. The second bit—well, you've heard of Arin the Bold, I'm sure."

"The former gladiator who used his winnings to amass a small fortune in land?"

"The same. Were you aware that he died last night?"

"Oh, no. That's a shame. I hadn't heard the news. I guess he had gotten on in years," Abernathy replied. He'd never met Arin but enjoyed the idea of the man, someone who came from nothing and quite literally fought his way to success.

"He was found on a bench in his garden. Apparently he liked to smoke his pipe out there at night. He was no longer a young man and he'd put his body through great stress during his fighting years so it seemed like a natural death."

"Seemed like, you say?"

"It rained quite heavily last night," Captain Honnel replied, absently scratching at his beard. "When we were informed about Mister Icedale today, one of my subordinates, quite a bright lad, actually, went to Arin's estate and asked to see his body. While the rain had been strong enough to wash his face clean, his nose had hardened bits of brown discharge in it, very similar to what we saw with Mister Icedale. Tests are being done to see if they are one and the same, but for now, we're working under the assumption that both men were assassinated."

"That's...well, that's quite something. I still don't see how I can help."

"Back to the first bit. It's time to read the message, Doctor." The Captain firmly moved several people out of the way so that Abernathy could get a closer look. The message was in Standard, but it was written in a hurry and with neither the best tools nor the best material. As near as Abernathy could tell, it said:

Remove the HED

Body dyes

TWO more homicides

Abernathy cleared his throat. "As I see it, that seems to be a threat that at least two more killings are going to occur."

"Everyone agrees on that. So we have two prominent citizens murdered in two nights, the promise of two more to come, and a bizarre message left behind. We have librarians and lore keepers trying to make better sense of the message. An expert in poison has been sent for. Anyone who might have some insight into what's going on. And that's why you're here. You're a...well, a doctor of the mind, as I understand it." The captain looked him in the eyes directly.

"That's accurate enough," replied Abernathy.

"So we want you to study this message, analyze the information we give you—which will be everything, and I don't need to tell you it's all highly confidential—and tell us what we're dealing with. What does this person want? Who's he going to go after next? Why did he leave this message today? In short, what the hell kind of mind are we dealing with here?"

"Well, I..." Abernathy paused briefly. "I'll do the best that I can with the information that you give me, but honestly, there's not a lot to work with here. Not in terms of gaining any insight into how this person's mind works, anyway. It seems more the bailiwick of traditional constabulary work—how were the two men connected, did they have any common enemies, were they—"

"And of course, we're working on all those aspects," Honnel interjected, "and some others that I've told you about. Also, one or two I'm not permitted to disclose. You're one of many experts that we're reaching out to for help. The news of Arin's death broke yesterday and everyone's got it in their heads that it was natural causes, and we're going to let them keep thinking that. News of tonight's misfortune has already begun to spread, so as far as people know, it's just one attack. If there *is* another killing, or if people learn that Arin did not die naturally, it will create a panic in the city. So we want very badly to catch this person as quickly as possible."

"I understand. Like I said, I'll do my best. I can go over everything

you have now, and as new information comes to light, you're welcome to send it to me at my office. You know where that is, right?"

"Not personally, but the Watch has your details."

"Right. It would be very impractical for me to work on this without my assistant being aware of it. We work together closely and I trust her with - "

The captain waved his hand. "One assistant, fine. No further than that. And you're responsible for her conduct as regards the confidentiality of this investigation. As things come in to me, one of my people will get them out to you. I understand you have your own affairs, but if I send something to you, please give it your attention as soon as you're able to. I don't anticipate needing to send for you again in person, unless of course..." he trailed off.

Abernathy nodded. "All right. Let's get started on what you know so far."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bahamian author Patrick Rodgers is a world traveler always in search of new music, great food, and honest conversations. His trips to North Korea, Iran, Cuba, and numerous other countries, as well as a love of history, have given him a rich palette of inspiration from which to create new worlds and stories. A lifelong storyteller, he loves bringing a bit of realism to classic fantasy and, he hopes, channeling a bit of Douglas Adams.

He previously collaborated with Neil Gaiman, and as a DJ he has a Billboard Top 40 album to his credit. During some of his numerous TV appearances, Stephen Colbert called him a “Difference Maker” and Don Lemon referred to him as a folk hero. He loves living in Philadelphia but during the cold winters, he misses the islands.

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