

THE FORGOTTEN MONK



GREG STOLZE

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A 13th Age Novel

By Greg Stolze



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Chapter One

He awoke as if he had never done so before. Reaching for memories and grasping nothing was instantly terrifying. He lifted his eyelids but moved nothing else. His heart raced, but it was no effort of will to stay still. It was instinct.

He was reclining beneath an evergreen, its needles clustered in feathery sprays. He rolled his eyes carefully, looking around.

It was morning. The temperature was cool and balmy. The fresh scent of growing forest filled the air, undercut by the faint odor of running water. Straining his ears, he could hear the thrum of a river, not too distant.

Carefully, quietly, he sat up and took stock of himself.

Male. Swarthy skin, tanned on his arms, deepening to hands that were nut-brown with a reddish tinge. Blunt fingernails, no rings or grooves from rings. Heavy calluses on the palms and, strangely, on the first two knuckles. A leathery pad at the base of the hand, on the side opposite the thumb.

He frowned.

That heavy spot on his wrist blended to a line of toughened skin that extended up his elbow. His veins were thick and his muscles were dense. Coarse black hair ran down his arms, thinning at his rounded shoulders before returning lightly on his back and more heavily on his chest.

Running his hands up his neck, he felt short, thick curls, giving way to weathered baldness. Part of his left ear was missing, sheared off at the very top and matched by a line of scar on the scalp beneath. He was clean-shaven, his cheeks dusted with scars from some youthful pox.

Muscular thighs. More callus on his shins, almost waxy. Gnarled, flat feet that bespoke an entirely shoeless life.

He stood. He'd slept in a linen loincloth, on top of a woolen cloak, its color an undyed gray. Hanging from a broken-off branch, as if from a garment hook, was a plain cotton robe. On the ground, beside the cloak, was a dagger. He gave it a long look, but turned his attention first to the clothes.

He sniffed himself, then the robe. It smelled like him — sweat, campfire, and a hint of incense. He put it back on. A rope belt was under it on the twig. He doubled it around his waist and tied it with the ease of long practice. Only then did he pick up and examine the weapon.

It had a heavy ring on the pommel, a well-used grip and thick quillons nicked and scarred from parried impacts. Unsheathed, the blade was black, smooth, longer than his hand. A diamond-shaped cross section at the handle narrowed to a needle tip. It was slender along its whole length. Its metal was naturally dark, marked with kinked whorls and waves. He touched the edge. It was razor-keen. Tiny scratches and notches on its surface told him that, well maintained as it was, it had seen use. Small grooves on the guard indicated that it was a little worn down from being turned, from grinding against something hard, metal or stone.

This was not a knife for cutting bread. He holstered it at the back of his rope belt.

Leaning against the tree was a plain, straight staff, fire hardened, perhaps six feet long. Beside it lay a leather rucksack, and his heart sped up. He reached, then paused.

He opened it.

Inside he found a loaf of brown bread, six red apples, and a large sausage. These were wrapped in white cloth and he set them aside. A purse beside them held a jangling blend of coins, golden and well worn. He counted out twenty-five, struck in cities all across the Empire.

Beneath the food and money, and wrapped in another cotton robe, was a casket made of silver. Though he had no idea what priceless things he might have owned in the past, he had to think that this outshone them all in its clear, clean luster and intricate, abstract workmanship. It was quite heavy and showed no sign of a latch or keyhole. He shook it and it felt as if something massy shifted within, but there was no sound of a rattle.

For a moment he stared. Then, with a shrug, he put down the casket and went to the river to drink.



When he returned, he held a wriggling fish in both hands, and its struggles — the soft, wet slaps as its tail struck his forearms, the rasp of scales in his hands, the effort of not letting it squirm free to fall in the dirt — distracted him. It was not until he reached his campsite that he realized a woman was sitting on his cloak, devouring his provisions, and examining his silver casket with a great deal of interest.

He watched her for a moment before she jerked her head up and stared in his direction. She stood.

She was ten feet tall, almost twice his height.

“Hope you don’t mind,” she said, and bit off about a third of his sausage. Only a tiny end remained.

“There’s little I can do about it,” he replied. To his ears, his voice sounded just right — deep, low, fairly quiet.

“That’s behavior I like,” she said, and smiled. Her plain features were marred by blackened eyes and a smashed nose, with a small smear of blood dried beneath it like a mustache. Her dress had once been lavish, but its brocade was stained from her nosebleed, and its hem was torn and muddy. On each wrist she had a heavy iron manacle, but the chain between them was broken.

“Why don’t you make a fire and cook that fish? The others should be along presently.”

“Do you know who I am?” the man asked, tilting his head in genuine curiosity.

“Should I? But you, little man... do you know *me*?” She popped the last of his apples into her mouth as if it were a grape.

“I don’t know anyone.”

“I’m Ugmar Thurlby!” she said, spitting out the apple core in his direction. “If you hesitate with that fish you might take its place on the breakfast menu! I’m no great digester of human flesh, but my sister Ognutt is positively *mad* for man-ham! Lucky for you we’re in a hurry.”

A left-handed toss landed the fish in her lap. A small cracking sound came from the man’s right hand as he clenched it and rotated it on the end of his wrist. “I’ll give you the fish and the gold if you leave the casket and go on your way.”

“You’re bargaining with an empty purse.”

He sighed.

“It seems very likely,” he said, “that I know the Deadly Arts.” He stepped forward, his arms gently forming curves in the air with the pure smoothness of a butterfly fanning its wings.

“You know what I know? ~~THE~~ ~~SECRET!~~”

With her gesture, a violet bolt flickered from her hand and crashed into his chest with bruising force, but it didn’t stop him. It didn’t even slow him much as he charged forward and leaped into the air. He jerked his right knee up for extra height at the apex of his leap, and then his left foot smashed into her jaw.

Staggering back, she tried to grab him, but he performed a lazy-seeming backflip, somersaulting through the air to land on his feet. His right hand fell on the staff as if he were casually leaning on it to rest.

“I tried to warn you,” he said, dodging a wild punch as she spat words he assumed were oaths. Then the timbre of her voice changed, producing the eerie echoes of enchantment. A sharp, actinic pop flung him backward.

Undaunted, he closed in again, spearing with the end of the staff, stabbing it at her and pulling it back like the flicker of a serpent’s tongue. She pivoted away to the left, then flinched back as it feinted at her face, only to give a full-throated howl when it smashed down onto the top of her foot.

But her flailing arms caught the wooden shaft and jerked her enemy close. With a snarl she raised the weapon up over her head, pulling the wiry fighter up off the ground.

He walked a series of kicks up her body, culminating by wrapping his thighs around her throat and squeezing with face-crimsoning force.

“What? No magic words?” he panted, hanging from the weapon between her hands.

She lurched forward, trying to drive him into the ground, but his legs untwined in a twinkling. Instead of smashing back-first into the turf, his feet came down running and, before she could even think to let go of his stick, he’d pulled her down onto her knees.

He was preparing to feint at her head with a kick, then stab her in the face with the pole, when he heard something behind him.

Specifically, he heard a booming voice say “Ey, ’ave off at our sister then!”

He looked back just in time to see a rock the size of his two fists flying at him with great speed. A gazelle leap backward saved him from the impact and, indeed, left the rock unimpeded on a trajectory right into Ugmar’s stomach.

“Gah!” Ugmar bellowed. “Hetricia, you slattern, you did that on purpose!”

“Didn’t!” replied a higher tenor, but the denial was marred by giggles.

Turning, the man could see a family resemblance between Ugmar and the two newcomers. For one thing, one had manacle chains dangled from her forearms too, but they also had similar faces — broad foreheads, rounded noses, wide-spaced eyes. Hetricia was shorter (merely four feet taller than him), with more refined features and long, glossy auburn hair. The third, whom he guessed to be man-ham fancier Ognutt, was the biggest, and while Hetricia was tittering at her sister’s discomfort, Ognutt’s lumpy visage, ill carved by nature, was convulsed with open hilarity. As he watched, she literally slapped her knee with mirth. She was the one with cuffs still on, and the broken chain between them rattled in counterpoint.

The man looked from Hetricia and Ognutt to Ugmar, and sprang toward the casket. He scooped it up and began sprinting full out as Ugmar shrieked, “Stop him, you fools! *Treasure!*”

“Ooh, shiny!” From the deep timbre of the words, he knew it was Ognutt chasing him, crashing through the forest on legs as long as he was tall. He didn’t look back, he simply put his head down and ran.

“We don’t have time for this!” came Hetricia’s voice in an exasperated whine. “Those miserable Comet cavalry will be here any minute!”

He dodged left and right at erratic intervals, as if waiting for another rock to fly toward his back. Hearing the nearing noises of pursuit, he planted the pole behind a prominent root and vaulted up onto a low-hanging branch. He rapidly scrambled upward, scarcely slower than he’d run through the brush.

“Dere ’ee is!” cried Ognutt, and he felt the branch beneath him shake as she launched herself into the trunk.

“Drop the silver, little man!” Ugmar was close behind, and with a gesture and a word, another violet bolt surged unerringly into his thigh. He dropped a few feet before catching himself, barely managing to keep hold of his prize.

“I can do this *all day!*” Ugmar shouted, following it up with another stinging enchanted assault.

“No yuh can’t,” Ognutt replied, “We gotta go ’fore them cavalry get through the woods.”

“Shut up, you *imbecile*, I’m trying to get him to come down!”

“Listen,” Hetricia called up, her voice dishonestly sweet and bright. “We’re in a touch of a hurry, so why not just drop the chest and we’ll leave you be? Honest, it would be best for everyone!”

Clinging to a branch and unable to ascend further, the man shouted back the most obscene suggestion he could generate, in the circumstances.

For a moment, the sisters were silent, looking up with surprised expressions. Then Ognutt shouldered the tree again while Ugmar used her magic directly on the limb from which he hung. He tried to catch a branch on the way down, but Hetricia had found

another rock and she shied it up into his ribs, forcing out a yelp as his property tumbled from his fingers.

Ugmar caught the glimmering prize with a greedy cry, and Ognutt grabbed the plunging man with a similar sound of gladness. He tried to crack his head back into her nose, but she just laughed and bear-hugged him with rib-popping force. When Hetricia stepped forward to grab his legs, he kicked her right at the base of her throat and reared back, but then she had his ankles.

“Ooh, ’ee’s all stringy,” Ognutt said in disappointment as he struggled in her grasp.

“Make him stop squirming!” Hetricia demanded.

Ognutt shifted her grip on his arms and then, with a deceptively small movement, broke both his shoulders.

He screamed, loud enough to send birds flying out of bushes for a great distance around, until Hetricia punched him in the stomach. Then he was too busy gasping and vomiting to shriek any more.

“Kiss your fortune goodbye,” Ugmar said with an evil grin. Then she swung the silver casket into the side of his head and everything went dark.



The second time he struggled back to consciousness, he was somewhat reassured to find recent memories, at least. The black gulf where his life to that point had once been was still terrifying, but that fear was offset by relief at being alive at all.

“What’s your name, stranger?”

He blinked, and worked his mouth around the strange taste of mint, and astringent, and enchantment. A green and purple flavor. Judging by the way his shoulders had shifted back into place, he’d been fed a healing draught. Nonetheless, his body ached.

“I wish I knew,” he replied, sitting up.

“Easy. You’re still a fair step from full function.”

The voice was a pleasant tenor, and the hands that steadied him were warm, blunt, firm, and strong. Blinking and focussing, he

saw the face of a dwarven woman looking at him with concern... and just a shadow of suspicion.

“Did you catch them?” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head. “How did you know I was chasing the sisters?”

“They mentioned a cavalry unit in pursuit: your boot-toes are tapered to fit a stirrup, with a heel to catch it.”

“Anyone could wear cavalry boots,” she said, helping him to his feet.

“But the worn streaks on yours show they slide in and out.” He cocked his head. “No spurs though. You must be an exceptional rider.”

“Commander!” cried a voice from the river’s edge. “We found their tracks... they made it to the water.”

“Curses.”

“Can’t you follow them along the shore?” the stranger asked.

She shook her head. “There’s a cliff, and falls, not far downstream. The Thurlby sisters can descend it easily enough, but we’d have to leave our horses, and without mounts they’d easily outpace us.” She stamped her bandy legs in frustration.

“I’m sorry if I delayed you,” the monk said. “But thank you for the gift of healing.”

“Hm? Oh, think nothing of it. I could hardly leave you to die in the forest!”

“Had they not paused to break you, they’d have escaped us in any event,” said a thin human soldier with sallow skin and a curved scar on his cheek.

The monk rubbed his eyes. They cleared a bit more, and he took in more details of the dwarf woman before him: a serious face, two braids the color of wet slate, obsidian eyes taking his measure. Long, thick eyelashes and a plump mouth. She smelled of clean horse, and iron, and oiled leather.

“I really don’t remember anything,” he said. “Anything at all.”

“Not true,” she replied. “Clearly you can talk.”

“I recall how to do things, but not events.”

“Not even your own name?” the scarred soldier asked.

He shook his head.

“Hmph,” the dwarf rubbed her chin. “Well, you can come to the muster house and we’ll see if anyone’s posted a watch-for about you... it’s not likely, most watch-fors are criminals, and people important to wizard-folk...”

“I could be either one of those things,” the stranger said.

“I’m Gruttla Hammerheart,” she said, shaking his hand. “I command a cavalry troop, Roundwell’s Comets. Can you ride, brother mystery?”

“I’ve no idea.”

It turned out he couldn’t.



It also turned out that the casket and his money were gone. He’d expected nothing less. He shook leaves and specks of bark off his cloak and draped it around his shoulders.

“You’re either a monk or you’re dressed as one,” Gruttla said, looking him up and down.

“I think I am... this ring of hair, the skin under it is pale?”

She leaned in. “Yep.”

“And the top of my head is tanned like my face. So I’ve worn my hair this way for some time.”

“Did your reflection look familiar at least?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure I know what it would feel like, to have a thing be familiar.”

“Probably under a curse,” offered the scar-faced soldier, who’d been introduced as Sergeant Horm. “We could take him to Lyr...”

“Don’t,” Gruttla said in a warning tone. Her eyelids lowered like the head of an angry bull.

Horm raised his hands and looked away, then helped the monk onto a horse.

“I don’t think I’ve ridden one of these before,” he said.

“No, I don’t figure you have,” Gruttla said, critically eyeing his posture and adjusting the stirrups for him. “Well, Rainbow there’s as docile a mount as we have on offer, she’ll follow Brute here if you leave the reins limp... you aren’t to hold them like that.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me, you’re the one who’s going to be sore. Lucky it’s not far.”



After conferring with Horm and the other soldiers, Gruttla dispatched them in several directions to alert other Imperial units, and to pass on the bad news that the three half-giantesses had escaped. She, she said, would ride back to their own headquarters with the forgotten monk and see what could be learned.

As they rode (as uncomfortably as she’d predicted, despite the flexibility of his hip joints), they settled on the name “Brother Cipher” for him, and she finally asked him about the dagger.

“Is it yours?”

“Er... it was in my possession when I woke up. Why? Do you recognize it?”

The road before them was a narrow dirt track with deep wheel ruts. Even though it was clear and straight, she looked down at it, rather than at him, before saying, “The Crusader’s people bear knives like that. So either you are one, or you were one, or you took it from one.”

“The Crusader?”

That got her eyes back on him.

“You know the icons,” she said, voice flat.

He said nothing. To the left, the forest came up thick and close, dense shrubs with waxy, dark green leaves creeping over the tall grass, arching hemlocks and cedars behind them. To the right, a thorn hedge guarded a tilled field from animal mischief.

“Perhaps,” he said, “I’d like to hear you talk of them.”

She snorted, but complied. “The Crusader styles himself ‘the fist of the Dark Gods’ and this region, the Burnished Prairie, was... good enough, at least when I first arrived. The Thurlby sisters were here, bullying lesser criminals and getting their noses into everything, but it wasn’t worse than elsewhere.

“Then a hellhole opened up — a little hole-poke through to the Abyss, right down there along the banks of the Silverwine river — so there were demons everywhere. Just... you can’t imagine,

fire and carnage and the Emperor's forces were on it pretty quick. But... closing the hole, they couldn't do it. We had them in a standoff, and then in comes the Crusader and he says he can take care of it, him and his soldiers march on the hellhole and break the demons to saddle, near enough."

"That's good, isn't it?"

Her lip curled. "Anyone that can make a demon bend knee and cry 'master' isn't someone to trust, even if he saved your farms. He's real open about the Dark Gods and their plans, or he says he is. Says everything has to be burned down, stripped, swept clean... and then, once we're all the starving, shackled slaves of his masters, they can start to rebuild the world. If we prove our loyalty and devotion, they will gradually loosen their grasp until we barely even know we're unhappy."

"I don't recall it, of course, but that doesn't seem to be how he's been described, to me." He frowned.

"Well, no, most people haven't seen his army up close." Gruttla was warming to her topic, easily keeping a comfortable balance on her horse while gesturing with her right hand. "They haven't heard one of his little lackeys — and my, does he have an absolute *passel* of lickspittle officers who can't say his title without sounding full of admiration! Those fools, they talk about the Great New Order, and how we're livestock and will be happier with boots on our necks because then things will finally make sense." She shook her head, voice peculiarly balanced between disgust and incredulity. "And people follow them! There's talk of letting them build their, their *fanés* and *dark temples* in the holy city of Santa Cora! People volunteer and line up to devote themselves to these 'Captains of Evil', because at least when you're on the Crusader's side, you can *schedule* when you're going to suffer and know exactly how much. And they don't like to let people die if they can get something from them. Too many folks are willing to be miserable as long as it's the misery they know, and that's what the Crusader promises. Safe, unhappy security."

They rode on in silence for a moment. They were nearing the outskirts of a small town, and then a green woman burst from the shrubbery at the side of the road.

"Oh officer! Oh, do stop, help, my husband... he is dead!"

“A world without pity is not worth saving. Let them go.”

With that request, the crushing fists dissolved, leaving both Grossthorn and Lyridel to sprawl on the floor.

Then, light.

At first, Cipher thought the roof had come off, but this was nothing like the grim, brooding gray of the outside sky. It was warm, and joyful, and indifferent to guilt and deserving. The Crusader looked truly sad, and truly resigned, as he turned his face to its source.

The Priestess descended on a shaft of radiance, coming past the chandelier and outshining it as the sun would, without bringing blindness. She said nothing and took no specific action, but suddenly the dark and forbidding hall seemed shabby and ridiculous. With its dusty corners illuminated in full, with the cracked and flawed varnish on the pews revealed, with the carvings looking gaudy and crude, the fortress of ominous evil was transformed into an unfortunate embarrassment.

“Oh, Project,” she said, “you have repaid your master’s faith in you.”

“They call me Cipher now,” he said. “Can you please escort me and my...” he glanced at Lyridel, who wasn’t meeting anyone’s eye, “my colleague out of here?”

“Of course,” she said. “There’s just one thing I have to do first.”

She crossed the room, each step simpler than a child’s gesture, more graceful than a dancer’s leap. When she reached the altar, she frowned, and it crumbled away into gravel.

The Crusader sighed.

“It could not abide,” she said, in a tone that was not sorry, but not proud either.

She leaned in and kissed the Crusader on the cheek, then turned to take Lyridel and Cipher by the hand.

“This isn’t over!” Grossthorn shouted after them. “Don’t think I’m *grateful* you spared me, it was foolish of you! You’ve made me your doom, , Project, Cipher... any name you take *I will curse*.”

“Be quiet, Grossthorn,” the Crusader said, and hearing his tone, Cipher twisted his head to look back. Just before the Priestess

gestured in light and took them away from that sad house of evil, he saw, briefly, a tear track on the warlord's cheek.



Then they were in the meadow before the muster house, and the rain had passed, its drops glittering on each bent grass-blade.

"If he had won," Cipher asked, "would you have let him put a temple like that in your holy city?"

"Yes."

Lyridel sucked in his breath, looking from Cipher to the Priestess. "That's a fearsome wager indeed! What did he have to give you?"

"He gave me nothing," she replied. "For my victory, he had to accept a gift."

"What gift?" the monk said.

"The hardest burden for a man in his position. He now knows that things can be better — that there is more to the world than expedience, that mercy and kindness are not mere illusions. It will be harder for him to serve as High Priest to the darkness now, though I've no doubt he'll continue."

Her smile was a little bit sad, but only a little.

"I have given him hope."

THE END