

## Third Door on the Left

Mist covered the ground and slightly dissipating as he walked along the grassy hill. His knee-high boots were covered in dew as he crossed from the servant's quarters over to the main house, Stoneford Manor. The three story building was dark except for the one light emanating from the third floor window. The sliver of the moon shone brightly behind him as he ventured closer to the open side door.

Two huge black dogs with brown spots greeted him at the side door. Their tails wagged back and forth with sheer happiness. He looked around the kitchen to the barren countertops and at the cold wood burning stove. When he looked back for the dogs, they were asleep on the hardwood kitchen floor.

He walked under the archway leading to the dining room. The white runner draped down the center of the polished table with a three pronged candle holder bereft of candles. Eight high backed chairs with cushioned seats surrounded the table.

He moved off into living room. The front door of the house was to his right and the stairs to his left. The living room itself had one red plush settee in front of the small stone hearth. The stairs were carpeted in red with brass rods at the base. He moved up the stairs and inspected the painting on the second floor landing. The man in the painting had a raven perched on his shoulder, but when he looked at the face he was amazed by the similarities between him and the man. They had the same dark hair and eyes and the same nose and mouth. They were related he knew.

He moved up toward the statue of a lady on the bi-level landing between the second and third floor. The white marbled statue was no more than a short man tall although the base brought

her height to two sticks, his own height. She was petite and wore a bemused expression on her face.

He moved passed her up to the third floor and saw the light coming from the under the third door on the left. He paused in front of the door and examined the etching on the brass knob. The etching was of a raven with wings spread ready to fly. He turned the knob and the door slowly creaked open.

A woman stood beside a dark, walnut dresser in front of a large open window. She was almost transparent except for the thick noose around her neck. He gasped before she turned to address him. "You will bring him to me. The last of my kin." She spoke in hardly an audible whisper. She climbed on top of the dresser and jumped out of the open window only to vanish before his eyes.

He had seen this vision before, but each time it was painful to watch. The raven's claws dug into his shoulder, and he turned to look the raven in the eyes. "Tiberius," it shouted.

Tiberius awoke with a shake. It was the raven, always the signs of the raven he followed and now the raven brought him to the City of Bern. Ever since the dreams started, he followed the signs for he was Tiberius, The Messenger of Shadows.

The sunlight still trickled through the tall pines surrounding the tavern on the northern outskirts of the City of Bern. The tavern had a high-pitched, gabled roof to keep the snow off in the winter. The smoke billowed from the twin chimneys on either side and out from the open front door. Though it was only mid-fall, the air was getting more and more crisp with each

passing moment. Tiberius galloped up to the tavern on his black sire with his two companions at his side. He dismounted and gave the reins to Oswyld.

Oswyld was a short man. A good two hands shorter than himself and almost three to Othar, but he was fair hand with a lock pick, a necessary trait needed for this job. “East gate at half night,” Tiberius told him and pulled his grey cloak tighter around him before walking inside. *I shall go somewhere warmer this winter.*

The tavern was filled with smoke and a potbellied man was chastising a young boy for not opening the damper before he lit the fire. Tiberius’ eyes began to water, and he turned to look for his other companion. The big, burly Othar stood solid as stone beside the door like he was told. He wore the scowl Tiberius taught him, well enough to pass for fierce.

Even in the haze of smoke, Tiberius easily scanned the room. He drew the attention of several people, but only one interested him, Fingers. The tall, lanky man sat at a booth mid-way down the aisle facing the door. Fingers nodded, though it was unnecessary. Tiberius knew of him rather well, mostly in deed, but in person as well.

His attention drifted off to the L-shaped bar and the raven-haired female gnome at the end. She was the Black Cat surely, though not as comely as he had heard. She was dressed in fine black silken garments, which undoubtedly hid the leather or chain armor beneath. He studied her hard, not in a leering manner, but rather more in suspicion. Mostly, he looked at the loaded crossbow that sat in her lap. Tiberius slid his hands down to the dirk on his right hip and the sword on his left.

Fingers raised a hand and she jumped down, nonchalantly placing the black leather strap of her crossbow over her shoulder. She walked with a confidence and even gave Tiberius a coy gap tooth smile before heading out of the tavern.

Another man he knew, Shank, sat in the booth opposite Fingers. “You presume to sit here?” Tiberius questioned the man.

“Aye, Messenger of Shadows.” Shank replied. He rose to his feet and gave Tiberius a bit of an arrogant smirk before he walked off toward the bar. Tiberius slid into the booth facing his sometime employer. Fingers was the hand of the Guild Master, the most nimble lock tumbler, and if stories could be trusted, the deadliest man with a blade in the Five Kingdoms. *These aren't stories, I am the deadliest man with a blade, if you'd care to find out.*

“You know the Stoneford Manor?” Fingers asked.

“Yes,” Tiberius replied. *I know it well atop Nightwatch Hill.*

“Third story, third door on the left, inside the closet, and underneath the floor boards you'll find the chest. Bring the chest and the contents to the river, you know the spot, one of the Duke's men will be there. Anything else in the house is yours.”

“What's in the chest?” Tiberius asked although he knew the answer. Knowing the answer before the question is asked makes all the difference in dealing with thieves.

“A scepter. Now, I must go. A long journey awaits.” Fingers replied. When he started to rise, Tiberius put a hand on his arm.

“Tell me why you didn't take this job or any other guild member. You owe me, remember.” Tiberius said in a harsh tone. Fingers' eyes were wide, and he gave a sigh.

“The real reason is I have another job, and the Duke and I are not on speaking terms, but the others,” Fingers words trailed off in thought. “The others are scared.”

“For a thousand gold, I thought every man, woman, and child in Bern would be lining up.” Tiberius said.

“The place is haunted.”

“Haunted?” Tiberius laughed, but Fingers only shook his head and the ringlets of his shoulder length brown hair tumbled over his green cloak.

“The tale, as I heard it, is as absurd a one you’re likely to ever hear. A tale of murder, revenge, curses, and the legendary Scepter of the Kings. Shank, tell our illustrious friend here the tale.” The bald headed man was mindlessly tugging on his black and grey beard before he got up and sat in the booth opposite Tiberius. “Meet us at the bridge after you’ve finished the tale.” Fingers told Shank.

Shank ordered two ales and began the tale. “The bloody feud between the two richest merchant houses, the Stonefords’ of Nightwatch and the Bywaters’ of Southridge are well known today, but forty years ago they came to an agreement. The dashing, young Reinhold of House Stoneford wed the enchanting daughter, Alwynn of House Bywater. The way I heard it, from Blind Pole, is that the Scepter of Kings was part of the dowry. Well, the truce was short lived and two years into the marriage, Reinhold was poisoned. Some say it was Alwynn’s jealous brother, Illiam, and others say it was another rival house that intended to marry Alwynn.”

“You heard this from a blind man?” Tiberius quipped.

“He wasn’t always blind and I’ll get around to that. Anyways, Lady Alwynn was so distraught, she hung herself outside from the rafters of their third story bedroom window. Illiam goes over and tears Stoneford Manor apart looking for this scepter, an ancient relic of the last King of Dreg before the Three Kingdoms.” Shank paused for moment. The potbellied barkeep set down the two wooden tankards of ale before them and slid the silver coins on the table with his fat, sausage fingers into his other hand. Shank eyed the barkeep and drank from the tankard.

“And now to our Five Kingdoms, a kingdom with no kings.” Tiberius toasted to no one in particular and drank from the tankard. “So, Illiam never found it.” Tiberius stated. *Obviously, he didn’t find it or I wouldn’t be here.*

“Just wait there’s more. So, about ten years ago, Blind Pole was working in the ports those days and on a ship here or there. And this old man, must have been eighty, tells him he’s Illiam. Blind Pole doesn’t believe him because Illiam can’t be more than fifty, but he believes in gold and this old guy was loaded. He drowns the old man out at sea and comes back to the mainland to find Stoneford Manor.” Shank took another swig of ale.

“Blind Pole cases the place for weeks and finally breaks in when young Willis Stoneford was away. He goes up to the closet, where the old man says the scepter was hidden, and finds it. The scepter is gold and full of jewels. Blind Poe was just a smiling, looking at the scepter sparkle by the light of the oil lamp, when the lamp goes out. So he’s fidgeting with the lamp and trying to get it lit, when a cold hand touches his face. He spins to look, but just like that,” Shank said with a snap of his fingers. “He’s blind and aged forty years. The scepter is snatched from his hands and something pushes him out the door. While he’s cowering on the floor, he hears the lock turn, the window slam open, and the faintest whisper of a prayer. A woman’s voice, so he says.”

“Anything else?” Tiberius said with a frown. *At least, I got a free ale out this.* Tiberius grimaced as he drank from the tankard. *Not, a good one at that.*

“Well, now comes the events from yesterday.” Shank retorted. “When they pulled Willis’ body out of Stoneford Manor. He couldn’t have been any more than forty, but they said he had white hair, and his face was all shriveled up and stuff.”

“They said?” Tiberius questioned.

“You know Eel and Skinny Lou?” Shank questioned and Tiberius nodded. “They said the body was found on the second floor in front of a painting of Reinhold.”

“The Lord Reinhold.” Tiberius stated.

“Right, but the way the guards at the south gate tell us...”

“The ones we bribed?” Tiberius questioned.

“Right, they said Lord Stoneford never visited the third story at all. Only the caretakers would go up there and only to light the oil lamp before dusk and to put it out after dawn.”

“To ward the evil spirits away?”

“Don’t ya see, that ghost guards the scepter or the scepter is cursed?” Shank implored him.

“No such thing as ghosts. Only, the shadows of the past.”

“You don’t believe in ghosts? Likely, they believe in you. Do yourself a favor, just go in and loot the place, but leave the third floor alone.” Shank rose to his feet and drank down the rest of his ale.

“Afraid I can’t do that.” Tiberius calmly said. He had come this far, and he was going to see it through ‘til the end of his days.

“Then bring extra light. Good luck.” Shank said as he walked away.

Tiberius swallowed down the bile taste in his mouth and walked toward his burly companion at the door. *No such thing as luck, Fate is not chance, everything has a reason, and everyone a purpose.*

“What took so long? I was getting tired.” Othar glumly asked Tiberius. His face faded from a scowl to an empty look.

“Only changes for the drop off. Nothing to worry about.” Tiberius told his companion in a flat calm voice. Othar was such a simple man, and if he had heard the story, no amount of gold would have persuaded him to go in that house. *He’s a lack wit and a dullard, and yet, I still have need of him.*



The bells of half-night rung in a hollow tone across the city from the Temple of Alora. The sliver of the crescent moon hung in the eastern sky and smiled amiably at the two men walking toward the east gate of Stoneford Manor. A light drizzle fell from the sky and grey clouds moved in from the west.

Oswyld knelt underneath a scrubby dead tree with peeling bark, but even behind a bramble bush with dense leaves, he knew he was easy to spot. The moon glinted from his chainmail hauberk and half helm, even so the brown-haired Othar dressed in brown leather walked right past him. *Blind and a dummy, but good with a club and strong as an ox.* Oswyld



looked up at the house, and the only illumination was from the third story. He shuddered for a moment. *I got a bad feeling, this isn't a good idea.*

“The horses are where we discussed?” Tiberius asked. Oswyld nodded. “Othar and I will take care of the... servants. You will see to the dogs.”

“You want me to kill them?” Oswyld asked.

“No, dogs are innocent. It's only people that must be punished. Here take this.” Tiberius said as he handed him a vial of liquid. “It will give them puppy dreams.” Oswyld smiled inside. He knew the last phrase was for Othar.

Oswyld headed toward the house, while Othar and Tiberius walked over to the building behind the house, the care takers quarters. Oswyld pulled two chunks of dry salted rabbit from his pouch and gave them a healthy dose of whatever liquid Tiberius had given him.

Oswyld had only been with the pair of them for three weeks. He worked for a mercenary company, The Clan of the Red Hand, in Skullmark. Tiberius came in looking for a few good men for hire. There were many more capable men than himself, and Tiberius offered a generous amount of coin. So much, that he could have bought five men. *In the end, I guess you're the lucky one.*

The side door was easy to pick, and he slid into the house quickly. His heart fluttered as he heard the soft padding of feet coming from around the corner. His fingers shook holding forth one chunk of meat. The black dog with brown spots whimpered and tucked his tail between his legs and the other dog, who could have been a twin, licked his companion before it sat on its back haunches. Oswyld cautiously moved forward and gave them both a snack.



The one story building was darkly quiet as the lock slid open and only the creak of the door broke the silence. Tiberius walked with a hollow echo from his knee-high, hard, black boots. Othar pulled the hood of his brown cloak over his head. *Tiberius said guard the door.* That's what he did. The mist of rain swirled about his face. He liked rain and dogs and pretty girls, who were nice to him, and pie. *Maybe, I'll buy some pie.* A lady peered down at him from the third story window. She was dressed all in white. He wanted to wave at her, but he blinked and she was gone.

Tiberius walked out of the building, a grim smile covered his lips. *Maybe, he's thinking about pie too.* "We going to the house?" Othar asked. Tiberius nodded pleasantly, he was always nice and never made fun of him. The ground squished beneath Othar's heavy feet, while Tiberius walked gracefully across the soft, wet grass.

Oswyld had brought two chests up from the cellar. Both were open and filled with gold. *They're so shiny.* Othar liked shiny things. "Othar, take these over to the horses and strap them down tight like I showed you." Oswyld said. Othar nodded and smiled. *I remember, just like you showed me.*

"Oswyld, check the third floor, third door on the left, in the closet, and underneath the floor boards." Tiberius ordered. Othar walked out into the night with one chest on each shoulder.

He didn't like the chests now, they were heavy, and his back hurt. *Maybe, Tiberius would give me some potion and I'd have puppy dreams.* The rain came down harder. He didn't like the rain now, too wet. He looked up over his shoulder and the lady was at the window. He forgot to

tell Tiberius about the lady. He always forgot. He waved this time though and almost dropped one of the chests. *Pretty lady, all dressed in white.*



Oswyld crept up the creaking staircase to the second floor. Tiberius walked over to a door on the second floor and picked the lock, while Oswyld continued upwards. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness though he would have preferred a lantern or oil lamp. The stairs were carpeted in a lush red with brass rods at the base to hold them in place. One of the rods must have been loose, because he slipped on one. The brass rod pinged and panged as it descended down the stairs making contact with the wooden railing before coming to a clanging halt down on the first floor.

Lightning flashed and shed light through stained glass from the bi-level landing above him. Tiberius looked up at him with mix of distain and amusement, like he always did. “Quietly,” Tiberius whispered.

Oswyld clambered to his feet and climbed the stairs again. The rain was heavier now and drained down in heavy streams on the colored glass. Lightning flashed again and he jumped with a yelp at the person in the corner. Only after he fell, for the second time, did he realize it was only a statue. Made of an exquisite white marble, the statue stood over two sticks in height, though two hands of the statue consisted of the base. She wore a bemused expression looking at Oswyld on the floor. *Come on man, you’re jumping at statues now.*

Oswyld rounded the corner leading up the last of the stairs. A pale orange light shone under the doorway, the third door on the left. Oswyld stomach was tied in knots, and he breathed deeply. Tiberius said there would be a light. Even so, fear gripped his mind. The hardwood floor

groaned at him and the darkness consumed everything on landing as he inched forth toward the light.

Oswyld put his hand on the door knob etched with a raven and turned the knob. The door drifted inward and a chill crawled down his neck. The room was well appointed with a dark walnut canopied bed. The sheer silky curtains drawn around the bed on all but the one side. The curtains seemed to flow and sway though Oswyld felt no breeze. *Something is not right. Run, get out of here.* On the wall in front of him, a dark walnut dresser stood underneath two large windows. A ceramic pitcher and bowl were atop the dresser with the oil lamp to the right. Oswyld glossed them over and walked slowly toward the closet.

The closet was barren, and Oswyld pulled the crowbar from his belt. He pried the floorboards easily. All the worry and doubts from his mind were gone as he found the chest in the cache. The chest was gold, inlaid with intricate designs. *It's solid gold.* He carefully picked the lock and opened the chest. He gasped in delight at the scepter inside the chest. The scepter was jeweled from the crown to the tip in rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. Like the chest, the scepter wasn't gilded in in gold, it was pure gold. Oswyld held it up to look at it in the light. The oil lamp flickered and went out. An immediate coldness enveloped him, and he sensed a presence in the room. The silky curtains swayed much more fiercely, and Oswyld frantically scanned the room clutching his crowbar. He could see his own breath before him and feel the frost as it bit down into his lungs. "The last of my kin." A soft voice said from behind him, and Oswyld tried to scream.



The horses pulled and brayed as the rain came down in sheets. Othar calmed them with firm pats, like good dogs. He strapped the chests down on the mounts just like Oswyld showed him. Othar ran back to the house. He was wet and cold. When the lightning flashed, Othar slipped in the mud. He didn't like mud. He never liked mud.

The light was out on the third floor, and he didn't get to see the pretty lady. *Oh, pretty little lady all dressed in white. Won't you dance with me tonight?* By the time he got back in the house, his cloak was drenched, and he hung it on a dining chair to dry. Othar cleaned his mud-encrusted boots on the first step of the stairs.

A door slammed closed upstairs, and Othar wanted to shout, but Tiberius said he couldn't shout. He walked up the stairs and whispered instead. "Tiberius, Oswyld, where are you?" There was no answer. He was afraid so he pulled out his club, Menace, banded with a strip of studded steel. Tiberius said it made him brave. He kissed his club for luck, but it didn't taste lucky, it tasted like dirt.

He noticed a painting. The man in the painting looked a little like Tiberius with a raven on his shoulder, but it was dark. The pretty lady was on the next landing. Only it was just a statue, but he thought it looked like her. He heard two voices talking from one of the rooms, the third door on the left. He gripped Menace tight and walked toward the door. "At last, I will come to rest..." the lady's voice whispered. Othar strained to listen. "With the last of my blood cleansed."

Othar opened the door, and a raven cawed at him from the shadows of the corner of the room and flew out of the open window. The pretty lady was there all dressed in white with a thick rope around her neck. She was glowing so brightly, it made Othar smile. She climbed on

top of the dresser and the wind gently blowing her flowing brown hair. She looked back at Othar, returned his smile, and jumped out of the window.

Othar screamed. “Nooooo!” He ran over to the window and looked down, but he didn’t see the pretty lady. The rain ran down his face and matted his hair. He was sad and even sadder, when he saw Oswyld on the floor. Oswyld looked very old, but it was Oswyld.

“Othar,” Tiberius said from the door holding a lantern in his left hand and a sword in his right.

“Oswyld, he’s dead.” Othar blubbered. Tiberius sheathed the blade and set the lantern down on the dresser. He closed the window and moved over to Oswyld and nudged him with his boot.

“Fate brings us to where we need to be.” Tiberius said. Othar joined in unison with Tiberius. “Everything has a reason and everyone a purpose.”

“And what else?” Tiberius questioned.

“Fate is cruel sometimes.” Othar responded.

“Very good Othar, grab the chest would you? I don’t think I can bear the weight.”



With dawn’s light barely rising on Nightwatch Hill, the moment Commander Stoddard dreaded was walking in the door, Inspectress Scarlet. The greyish-skinned gnome walked with confidence. She was dressed in scarlet satins trimmed in gold lining, and her raven hair hung around her left shoulder. Even though her gap tooth smile was endearing, the words that poured from her lips landed like venomous daggers into the soft flesh of lesser men.

“Commander Stoddard, I will have your report now.” The inspectress demanded.

“I will have my report on your desk by dusk this evening.” He replied.

“Sit,” she commanded with a glare. “His Grace, has commanded me and therefore, I command you.” *Impetuous, little woman.*

“Very well,” Commander Stoddard yielded. “Three of the Duke’s men were found by the river. One in up in a tree, throat cut from ear to ear. The other two on the riverbanks, one had his head bashed open with a blunt object, and the last skewered through the heart.

“Here the dead are a little less grisly. The two caretakers have identical wounds, dagger to the chest, but no blood.”

“No blood?” The inspectress asked.

“None,” He answered. “There must be some mistake, but papers list one being one hundred and twenty years and the other one hundred and nineteen. The bodies looked decayed like they have been dead a long time.”

The inspectress seemed to ponder that, gently drumming her fingers on her chin. “What about the one lying over there?” She asked pointing over to the body covered by a blanket in the living room.

“No visible wounds, his hair is stark white and his face...the same as Lord Stoneford yesterday and he was found in front of a painting on the second floor as well. His papers say, he’s thirty-five from out of Skullmark.” Commander Stoddard stated. “The name is Oswyld Southridge.”

“A bastard of the Bywaters’? I thought all the Bywaters’ were dead. Is anything missing from the house?”

“The vault in the cellar was looted, but nothing else.”

“What about the third floor, third door on the left?”

“The third floor was boarded up fifteen years ago. I have no idea if anything is up there.” Commander Stoddard stated. For a moment, the inspectress looked as if she was going to choke, and her face turned a shade of purple-red. Inspectress Scarlett let out a stream of obscenities unmatched by anyone he had ever met, and he was a sailor for twenty years. In her rage, she picked up the candle holder and flung it at the glass cupboard. The glass shattered sending fragments across the room.

“Assemble the knights!” She shouted. “Now, Commander!” *And to think the morning had started out quite nice.*



The sky was bright blue, and the little white clouds drifted like fluffy bunny tails. Othar watched the fluffy tails until they came to the edge of the forest. He couldn’t see through the dense foliage of the forest. He was tired of riding and looked back for Oswyld, but Oswyld was dead. He forgot again. They plodded along slowly in the shallow creek towards a village in the country of Almont.

The sun drifted downward as they approached the wooden palisade surrounding the village. “Tiberius, can I be a messenger?” Othar asked reluctantly.



“It is not for me to decide. Do you not enjoy serving? There is more pie for those that serve.” Tiberius answered him with a smile.

“And pretty girls to dance with?”

“Yes, many pretty girls.”

“I wanted to dance with the pretty lady dressed in white, but...”

“She would have liked that, but she sits next to our Lord now.”

“Then, I will serve.”

“Do you remember your words?”

Othar nodded with a grin. He remembered. “I am a servant of the Lord of Shadows. His will is my want and I will serve his messenger ‘til the end of days.”

The guard at the gate was not very nice and didn’t smile. He only said ‘papers’ and ‘pass’. Othar watched as Tiberius gave the guard papers. The guard bowed. “Welcome to Raven’s Wood, Lord Nightwatch.”