

The Rat and The Hammer

Relfo The Rat leaned lazily against one of the rough cedar posts that held up the sagging roof of the *Smiling Wolf* alehouse, cleaning his filthy nails with one of his *Seven Ladies*. The razor-tipped, silvered dagger that he had named *Sista* after the third of his seven wives making short work of the grit lodged beneath his nail. The small man inspected his work making sure the four digits of his left hand no longer appeared as he had been digging in a midden heap, then slid the shining blade back into the sheath at his belt with a quick, nimble-fingered flourish. He scratched the small scrubby beard that decorated just the point of his chin, smoothing the purple and green-dyed whiskers to a point while taking in the clamor of the taproom. The little thief's keen eyes searched the bawdy crowd for a too-full purse.

How had he come to be here? He a Bravo of *Three Swords*, stuck in a rundown fort in the borderlands. One tiny mistake and here he was, alright honestly two simple mistakes. How was he to know the saucy wench was married and to a jealous man to boot! Alright perhaps three mistakes had landed him here in the middle of nowhere. In truth all revolved around the same event, so they all should truly count as only one mistake. Really how was a man to know the woman belonged to the master assassin of the *Redsmile Brotherhood*. Master indeed, he had incapacitated the man in a knife fight and he had not even been wearing pants at the time. He hadn't killed him, just gave him a couple of scars...and made love to his woman...and helped himself to a bit of traveling coin from the man's purse...oh and there was the whole taking the dagger that was the mark of his rank in the guild. The gods were cruel, always putting temptation in his path, and them knowing his many weaknesses. Enough of past days, now to the task at hand, his purse was near empty and he was tired of this retched place. He needed coin to fund his trip. Luckily the *Smiling Wolf* was crowded this night, the small border fort population swelled by the merchant caravan that had arrived from far off *Pryce*, bringing sea-bought trade goods to the landlocked borderland guard-post.

His eyes settled on a massive fellow defensively hunched over his stew bowl. The man was broad and thick of chest and limb, built like a blacksmith. A map of scars covered every inch of flesh that was not hidden beneath boiled leather tunic and chainmail shirt. The big man's square-jawed face would have been handsome if not for the scars and shaven head. The scarred man shoveled wooden spoonful after spoonful of stew as if he had not eaten for days. The large bowl quickly being emptied to match the other pair that sat abandoned in front of him. What had caught Relfo's searching eye was that while the man guarded his food in a massive embrace, his purse sat open on the table to the side of him, half its shining blue-coined contents spilled forth for every eye to see. The man's fearsome appearance had so far kept most of the tavern goers at bay, but it would not be long before some or all the man's coins ended up in a sneak thief's purse.

The food was good. The thick mutton stew was far better than the salt pork and barely porridge he was used to. Sterngosh The Hammer, champion of a hundred pit fights spooned another heaping bite of brown-gravy goodness into his mouth. He did not understand how he had come to be here, but it was time to eat so he did. The last

day had been strange, Oleg his master had come to him all smiles and back pats as he had every time before when Sterngosh had crushed the opponents that stood before him. Last night had been no different to start, besides fighting three instead of one. The three swordsmen had been quick, blades spinning and flourishing for the cheers of the crowd, but they had all in the end fallen beneath his hammer. Then he was taken from the pit, back to the wagon where he slept and rode between fights. It had always been that way ever since the smith had sold him to pay off a debt. Oleg was a good master, he rarely if ever beat him, much less than the blacksmith. Oleg fed him regularly and sometimes rewarded him with wine or a woman if the fight had been particularly good. This time was very different though. The plump slave master had brought him wine and made him drink a cup with him, then he unlocked Sterngosh's iron collar and gave him a purse filled with coins, far more than Sterngosh could count as he had only ever managed to ever count higher than five, that only because that is how many wolves he had fought once in the pits. The wolves had been one of his first fights and had nearly killed him, before he had learned to fight with the hammer. Then Oleg had said to drink to his freedom, he had earned it. Sterngosh didn't know how or why and when he tried to ask the slave master had laughed all the more as if Sterngosh had made a jest. Then with another pat on the back Oleg and the wagons were gone, off on the road to another fight. Sterngosh stood watching them fade into the night. Oleg had given him his hammer, mail and the purse. Freedom was not all that good in Sterngosh's mind, no wagon, sleeping furs or food. Also there was no one to tell him what to do. He stood for a long time in the muddy streets people walking around him as if he were a statue.

He finally followed his nose towards the tavern with the wolf sign hanging out front and food. When he asked for some he was told to find a place to sit and then a pretty girl brought him a bowl of stew. She asked for coin so Sterngosh opened his purse and she took one. It had been that way for each of his three bowls of stew. It seemed easy enough and the stew was good, so he just kept eating, until he could think of what else to do. Maybe he would have some wine to wash down his stew? He would have to think hard on that.

Relfo stood and watched the big man and his seemingly never ending appetite. The man look up now and again almost child-like, as if he waited to see if someone had seen him doing something wrong. His staring was broken as he heard a small band of sell-swords hushed conversation raise in volume and catching only the end of the growled statement "I tell you it is him, the dog that cost me so much coin in the pits!"

The little thief scoped the band of seven with a narrow eye, each was armed with sword or axe and most had at least a fighting knife or dagger. The most disturbing thing was each shared the red and gold badge of *The Kingfisher Trade Company* as did probably near thirty others in the tavern. They all worked or were hired by the same trade caravan that was in town. Men with a united cause or purpose always had more friends lurking in the shadows or ready to come to aid if one of their number was involved in a scrap. It did not look good for the stew loving brute. Relfo was a blade bravo of *Three Swords*, he and his *Seven Ladies* had seen their fair share of trouble. He could smell a fight coming, as he watched one of the seven, a tall youth with a mop of dirty blonde hair throw back another mug of courage and his friends goading him on with

every swallow. There would be trouble, and the scarred man was on the short side of it, worse yet he seemed oblivious of any malice, just eating his stew. It wasn't Relfo's business he would take his leave. He had managed to keep himself out of too much trouble these past few weeks at the border fort, no need to end that now for some stranger.

The blonde youth slammed down his tankard and stood. He was tall, well over six feet and covered in lean muscle, a long sword hung at his hip. He loosened his sword in its scabbard, set his jaw and turned towards the big man's table.

"I'm getting back my coin" he stated to the rousing guffaws of his friends.

He pushed his way through the crowd of people until he stood in front of the man eating his stew. The big man paid him no mind and just continued eating. Relfo wanted to leave, but he could not take his eyes from the coming conflict.

"You are the one called Sterngosh The Hammer?" The tall swordsman spat.

The scarred man looked up from his stew long enough to nod his answer and then went back to his meal. This perceived disdain sent a red flush of anger across the tall youth's beardless face.

"You cost me money this day and I'll have it back" came the angry words through gritted teeth.

The big man seemed to take no notice, until the bold youth reached over and closed his hand around the purse laying on the table. The scarred man's big hand shot out with a speed far quicker than his size should allow, grabbed the blonde man's forearm in an iron grip, a sudden yank and the sounds of cracking bone and a scream of pain cut through the taproom as the scarred man snapped the swordsman's arm like a twig and said only one word "MINE". The youth fell to his knees cradling his ruined arm like a baby as the purse hit the floor and blue coins scattered about the straw strewn floor. The taproom went silent for a stunned instant and then stools and chairs tipped over, men rose to their feet and steel was loosed from a score of scabbards. Most stood their ground, but the broken armed youth's drinking companions circled the big man's table. All were as tall and most thicker of build than the blonde man who sat crying like a whelp trying to push the broken shard of bone back into his skin. The oldest of the six, a red haired bearded fellow with a grim looking battle axe held in a white fingered grip spoke up first.

"You will pay with more than coin for that you dog" as the others nodded their agreement with hard set jaws.

The scarred man's head raised from his bowl of near finished stew, his plain almost simpleton face looked up, now replaced with a visage of deadly anger. Veins bulged on his bull-like neck and spread like angry worms across his shaven temples and he rose. The scarred man at his full height was a head taller than any of them and twice as broad, but he faced six and his hands were empty. Relfo should have left, but that twinge of honor that resided deep in his guts decided that at this inopportune time to rear its heroic head. The slight man stepped right between the six and their soon to be victim.

"Is there a need for six to slay just one?" The black cloaked thief grinned causing the long scar that marred the right side of his face to pucker at the corner of his thin smile.

“Stand aside little man, this is not your fight. Let us be at our bloody work” growled the redheaded axe man.

“The odds are a bit lopsided, nine to six stacked against you” Relfo grinned his eyes dancing with deadly anger his smile did not tell.

“I see but two dead men before me” spat another swordsman with a thick yellow beard.

“Take a better count you hairy faced oaf, tis the big man, myself and my Seven Ladies” Relfo chided as he swept back his cloak to reveal his mismatched collection of exquisite daggers, throwing and fighting knives sheathed and strapped about his waist and across the chest of his blue dyed leather jerkin.

Other men wearing the Kingfisher badge stepped forward steel in hand and they were now surrounded by at least a score of caravaners.

“Seems the odds just balanced in our favor” grinned a gap-toothed, grizzled black haired man wielding a notched broadsword bolstered by their new found allies.

“Let him go, it is me you want” stated the big scarred man from behind Relfo.

The ring of caravaners paid him no heed and started to close in around them. The gap-toothed broad swordsman raised his sword arm and was rewarded with *Arda* Relfo’s throwing knife in his throat, the man went down choking on his own blood. The rush was on sword and axe blades licked at them, tables were upended, serving wenches screamed, drunkards cussed and ales were spilled. Relfo danced and ducked between deadly blades, his hands filled with steel parrying for his life. A large hand closed around the leather wrapped, iron haft of a warsledge and the men of The Kingfisher Trade Company came to know why the big man was named Sterngosh The Hammer.

The mighty pit fighter swung the steel-headed weapon with the ease most men would wield a dagger, its broad flat head slammed down on the yellow bearded axe man shattering his skull with such fury that blood and brains sprayed in a wide arc and drove his jaw into his chest. Sterngosh slammed the butt of the hammer haft into the gut of a swordsman who tried to stab him from behind with enough force to send him flying and spill the contents of his stomach with a single blow. Two other swordsmen charged him and he swept their blades aside with a wide hammer swing, using his momentum to ring the double headed flat and hammer spiked warsledge into the waiting face of yet another Kingfisher man killing him as his face was pushed in like a rotten tomato. Where the hammer rang, swords broke, limbs snapped, heads splattered and even one fellow’s chest was caved in. In a few heartbeats Sterngosh had cleared a wide area of opponents, leaving only broken and crushed bodies strewn about the floor. Relfo’s daggers had done their share, several men held in guts or tried to stanch the bleeding of deep cuts about their wrists, thighs and necks.

The two now stood back to back, the table that stood between them shattered to splinters inside the red ring of death they had woven. Near a dozen men lay dead, dying or broken at their feet. More men pushed through the tide of onlookers and serving wenches that rushed towards the safety of the door and some of those men wore the brown cloaks of the border fort soldiery.

“MY FRIEND WE MUST GET CLEAR OF THIS PLACE, A DOOR IF YOU PLEASE” Relfo shouted pointing at a near wall with one dagger and parrying a sword with the other.

Sterngosh’s thick head somehow got his meaning and the big man’s hammer struck the plaster and timber wall, blasting a ragged hole wide enough only for Relfo. Two border fort soldiers rushed Sterngosh swords in hand, one scoring a painful hit along his ribs, but his chainmail kept it from being little more than a bruise. Sterngosh brought the hammer down on the steel helmet of the soldier’s head and flattened helm and head with the killing blow. The other soldier leapt backwards seeing the terrible death that awaited him. Sterngosh went back to his door making, slamming three short handled strokes, widening the hole enough for himself.

Relfo did the dagger dance and the blade bravo was able to keep the three Kingfishers and the single soldier at bay, but could not strike a blow in offense. He would tire soon and one or more of the men would have him. He hated his streak of heroism at times like this, until a hammer whooshed over his head and smashed the head of one of the Kingfishers.

“DOOR READY” bellowed Sterngosh as he stepped into the fray.

Relfo needed no coaxing, he tumbled through the big man’s legs towards the newly made exit, sheathing one dagger along the way. When he came to his feet he stood over the gap-toothed dead man who had his throwing dagger sheathed in his throat. Luck was with him, he bent and plucked the knife from its fleshy sheath. Sterngosh held his hammer across his body and drove a pile of the swordsmen backwards to fall into a cursing, jumbled heap. Relfo sheathed the knife and plucked up an oil lamp from where it hung on a cedar post.

“WE RUN!” Relfo screamed over the clamor of combat and then ducked out the gaping hole, Sterngosh followed.

Relfo pitched the lamp into the hole as soon as Sterngosh was clear, the oil spread, caught and flames raged to cover their exit. Relfo stood for a second under the swinging smiling wolf sign to make sure the flames caught and the *Smiling Wolf* became the *Flaming Wolf* with one little lamp. Relfo dashed off after the big pit fighter who seemed to just be running with no particular destination. It took all the little man had to catch up with him and turn his trail towards the stables. They ran past throngs of soldiers and towns folk all driven into a maddening frenzy by bloody combat and the blaze that was once the *Smiling Wolf*. Alarm bells sounded and almost every member of the population was drawn towards the fire and the threat that it might spread amongst the close set buildings of the fort. Relfo hoped that it would be enough of a distraction to see them clear of the place with a pair of horses beneath them. Moments later they reached the long stone building that held the forts mounts.

The doors of the barn were flung wide and a dirty faced stable boy nearly ran headlong into them as he struggled to keep hold of the half dozen buckets he drug along with him. The boy paid them little heed besides a high pitched yelp of surprise before he swung wide around them. Relfo dashed into the barn, the smells of horseflesh mingled with those of dung and hay. The quick footed thief made a hasty inspection of the building to ensure that no other stable hands were about.

“Grab a pair of those horses and be quick” Relfo ordered as he went to retrieve saddles and harness.

Sterngosh, gulping in air after the battle and running escape started to head towards the first horse stall, but then stopped and a puzzled look crossed his simple face.

“We not steal horses?” He asked shooting Relfo a grim expression. Relfo rolled his eyes under his cowl where the big man could not see. Leave it to him to throw in with an honest man.

“No, these are my uncles horses. He won’t mind if we barrow a pair” He lied easily, yet felt bad for some reason deceiving the big warrior.

That was good enough for Sterngosh, borrowing was alright, but not stealing. The big pit fighter leaned his heavy sledge against the wall and went to grab a pair of horses. He knew nothing about horses except how to hook them to the slave wagons for master Oleg and that he liked them. He picked a little fast looking black one for his new friend, since he was little, fast and wore a black cloak. Then he picked a big grey one for himself. It shorted and reared when he came close, but a good wallop to its jaw with his meaty fist and it calmed right down, though it was a bit shaky as if it had too much wine. Not long after Relfo came running over with a pair of saddles. It took a few long minutes to saddle the horses, since Sterngosh had no idea how to do it. Relfo hoped the big man would not be his end because of it.

To set his mind at ease he took time to take a look out the barn door down the street. Several surrounding buildings are now a flame and the *Smiling Wolf* was beyond saving. Relfo could see people running around like ants in the shadow of the blazes. A group of soldiers tried desperately to keep the North watchtower from burning, but the roof was already burning in several places. It would be long days before he could safely enter this border fort again, if ever. Well no matter crying over burnt alehouses they needed to be off and fast. With luck the vast amount of destruction had pulled the guards from the main gate and they could just ride through, no one the wiser. The little thief scampered towards his newly acquired mount, until he saw Sterngosh trying in vain to mount the big grey warhorse.

“I take it you have never ridden a horse?” Relfo asked already knowing the answer seeing the big man nearly pull the horse over trying to pull himself up using just his arms.

It would have been comical, had they not been running for their lives. So he showed the big man how to mount and after three tries he was finally on horseback. He gave the pit fighter a hasty lesson on riding and hoped it would be enough. He had not risked life and limb to aid the big fool, just to have him caught or captured because he could not get his horse to move.

Relfo handed Sterngosh his massive weapon. The warsledge was so heavy the little thief could barely lift it and almost wrenched his back getting it high enough for the big man to grab it. Sterngosh took the weapon lifting it with one hand and laying it across his saddle with little effort, if any. The man was strong, probably the strongest man the little thief had met, he just wished he was a little brighter. The gods were cruel, all that might and a brain the size of a pea. No matter he had brains enough for both of them and for once he was sure he could trust a man, he was too dumb to be dishonest. A slap on the warhorses rump and they were off Relfo had to almost heard the big

warhorse with his little mare, but they managed to make the gate. Luck was with them and as the thief had hoped the gate guards had been drawn away trying to aid in controlling the fires.

They rode through the gates and West along the muddy trade road for nearly an hour leaving the alarm bells and blazing fires behind before they chanced leaving the road and headed South into the rolling hills. They made good time, the warhorse followed Relfo's mare and did most of the work, a good thing since Sterngosh just mostly hung on for dear life. The moon was high and nearly full so even riding at night it was easy to pick a safe trail. They rode the horses hard until they were lathered and then Relfo slowed their pace and looked for a place to hold up. He found a stand of scrubby yellow pines that would hide them from any traveler, at least those that were not seriously looking for them. They brought horses inside the trees and dismounted, tying them to a pair of short, but sturdy yellow pines near a small stand of grass that dominated onside of the small clearing. The little thief found a patch of mossy ground and flopped down, weary from the night's events. Sterngosh stood holding his hammer at the ready and gazed up at the starry sky, until Relfo told him to sit down. The big man obediently listened and took a spot close to Relfo.

"So, my big friend they call you Sterngosh if I heard right?" Relfo asked as he fished around in a belt pouch and produced a pair of coin purses, both had the strings cut.

"Sterngosh The Hammer" the big man beamed a happy grin and shook his head at the same time.

Relfo spread his cloak over his legs and up ended both purses onto it, blue coins and trade gems spilled out to sparkle in the moonlight, and continued the conversation as he separated the coins and trade gems into piles for counting.

"You are a pit fighter, of some renowned, or so I hear?" he said while examining the grade of a deep green *Earthstone*.

Sterngosh's brow furrowed as if deep in thought.

"What is renowned?"

"Famous, known, never mind, a pit fighter, yes?"

Sterngosh nodded.

"What is your name?" the big man asked, rubbing his ribs where the sword had struck him.

"I am called Relfo the Rat, a bravo from the great city of *Three Swords*" he answered while tossing coins into both pouches.

"Renowned?" Sterngosh asked, slurring the work on a clumsy tongue.

"A bit in certain circles, and a bit too much in others. That is why you see I'm here in the broderlands, because of my... renowned"

Sterngosh nodded, but his face showed he did not really understand fully.

"Well, Sterngosh the Hammer tell me your tale. It will be some time before the horses are ready for travel again and I myself could use a bit of rest."

Sterngosh, told the thief of his days living and working with the blacksmith, of how the blacksmith had sold him to Master Oleg to pay a debt. He talked about how

Master Oleg had taught him to fight in the pits and of his many battles that some said where a hundred, but Sterngosh didn't know what that meant. Of how he now had his freedom and how he did not really like being free except for meeting Relfo, before he realized he was talking to Relfo and then he just grinned a bit sheepishly and was quiet. By the time he was finished the sky was turning pink with coming of dawn. Relfo had sat and listened to it all, stretching out on the soft moss and gazed at the stars after counting the purses.

"Well that is some tale my friend, I would like to show you what it is to truly be free if you would come with me. I think you might grow to like it as much as if not better than the Pits" Relfo said from where he was propped up on one arm.

Sterngosh nodded, he liked this little man and liked how he called him friend. He would need someone to tell him what to do and the little man could fight and he liked that too.

"Well, it is settled then, partners it is" Said Relfo and tossed one of the coin purses to Sterngosh.

"What's this?" the big man asked catching the purse.

"Traveling money, it is a long way to *Skullmarr* and my uncle wouldn't want us to be poor as beggars, so he gave me these coins to go along with the horses"

"Your uncle left this for me?" Sterngosh asked.

"Why...Yes, My uncle is very giving person and told me to find a good friend and trustful partner for my travels and you more than qualify on both accounts"

Sterngosh smiled his foolish grin, though he did not understand most of what Relfo said, but he understood friend and that was good enough for him.

"We the Hammer and The Rat" Sterngosh smiled.

"I prefer The Rat and The Hammer, but we can work that out along the way. Now get a bit of sleep, we have great adventures ahead of us and adventuring is a tiring business..Partner" Relfo grinned back at him as he pulled his cowl over his eyes.

"Night Partner" Sterngosh said as he lay back on the soft moss, hammer in one hand, coin purse in the other and then a little quieter he said "night...friend".

Relfo the Rat chuckled to himself, perhaps the gods were not so cruel after all.