

The Bronze Sorcerer

by /a/non

It must have been his imagination. Noises were rare along this stretch of the Tin Road. Even the high wheeling hawks, normally so quick to sing of their pride, had not cried out all day. To the man trudging down the road, there seemed to be no breathing thing within ten leagues, save for himself and the hawks. The few stunted trees that spotted the rocky plain appeared to cringe as if they too had heard the tales of shadow spirits haunting this part of the land, and cowered in fear.

The traveller heard the sound again, a muffled shout, perhaps. He had not imagined it before. He raised his head and squinted into the glare of the setting sun. The burning brightness obscured the landscape ahead, but a dark smudge of dust floated on the horizon, no bigger than the man's thumb. Another sound rang out, with the high pitch of a woman's scream. The man broke into a jog.

The sun had half sunk below the horizon by the time he approached the source of the noises. Half a dozen corpses sprawled in patches of dark mud, where their blood had mixed with road dust. Four of them were large bare-chested men, eunuchs raised on growth nectar to make them strong and stupid. The wooden litter they had been carrying lay broken on the ground next to them. A fifth man lay clutching a bloodied spear, face down, his tall hide shield partly covering his head, as if to hide the shame of his failure. An unarmed middle-aged man lay pierced by arrows a few paces beyond, his shaven scalp as smooth and lifeless as stone, the silver streaks in his beard stained black once more with dried blood.

A seventh corpse lay in a heap against the base of a wizened tree less than a stone's throw away. No sign of the woman. No sign of any pack animals either. Few would be foolish enough to travel this far into the wilderness without adequate supplies. The traveller sighed. He was one such fool. The Tin Road was seldom

travelled these days, and it had been a week since he left last human settlement. The tin merchants who had given the road its name no longer used this route, having found new sources of the metal a generation ago.

As the traveller approached the tree, he saw that not one, but two bodies lay beneath it, on top of each other. The blood-encrusted tip of a blade jutted from the back of the man on top. As the traveller rolled the body over and onto the ground, the swordsman underneath let out a long low groan. Not a corpse then. Not far from it, though. The man's face seemed drained of life already, a fresh dribble of blood running down his chin to join the pool that soaked his padded linen shirt.

The man's eyes flickered up and met the traveller's. He opened his mouth to speak, but did not have the breath. His eyes were desperate, begging this stranger to understand his wordless plea. He died without making a further sound, staring at a point behind the traveller's head.

This whole mess smelled of trouble. The bandits who had attacked this party had not been scared off by the two armed guards. And for what? The woman? A rich one, to be borne in a litter. For ransom, then. They were lucky to have found such a prize on this deserted road. Too lucky.

Good sense was telling him to keep walking. The next city was at least another day's walk from here. He hefted the half full water-skin tied at his belt, his last one. He would be thirsty when he arrived, if he could not find any fresh water before then. Hungry too. And penniless.

The traveller looked around. Another corpse had fallen behind a rock that hid it from the road. A second dead bandit, judging by his ragged brown cloak. A trail of dark spots in the dust led away to the north. More blood? He crouched down and examined the trail in the fading light. Footprints and hoofprints too, not from a horse, but a donkey or mule.

The traveller returned to the spearman who had fallen sprawled out on the road.

"Excuse me, my friend," murmured the traveller as he took

the spear and shield from the young man's slack grip. "I need these to finish what you started." The traveller had his own sword, the blade only a cubit long but made of good bronze and sharp as the night wind. If there was more blood to be shed, however, a spear and shield might stop that blood from being his own.

The sun had almost hidden its face completely by now, but there was enough of a twilight glow that the traveller had little trouble following the trail of blood off among the crags and boulders. He kept up a swift pace, trying to gain ground before the sun's fading light disappeared altogether. It was almost too dark to see the tracks when he heard another scream, not a woman's this time, but the cry of a wounded beast. Shouting followed, and the traveller followed the noise until he could make out the words.

"Of course it did! I've damn near broken my own leg a dozen times in the last hour, it's as black as Khaed's arse out here. Let's butcher the donkey and camp here, and at least we can eat some meat tonight."

"Shut your steaming maw, Khenek, or by Gamat's seventh tit I'll finish you off. If it wasn't for your hobbling we'd be at the meeting point by now."

Khenek did not reply.

The traveller took advantage of the still-braying donkey's cries to creep closer until only a single large boulder and a dozen strides of broken ground lay between him and the bandits.

"How's the whore? Is she hurt?" The second man barked again. He seemed to be the leader.

A third man spoke up. "Bruised perhaps, but not bad. Not enough to knock the spirit out of her," he chuckled.

"Good," grunted the leader. "She walks. Untie her legs, and mind she doesn't kick you in the balls. We don't need another straggler. Khenek, find some brush to make a torch. Atum, put that beast out of its misery, it's giving me a headache."

A fourth man grunted an acknowledgement. He must be Atum.

“And see if there’s anything worth taking from the packs. No more than you can carry, though. Myl will have his hands full with the girl, and Khenek is too slow already.”

The traveller heard Khenek limp off in search of fuel and knew that his chance had come. Mouthing a prayer to his grandfather’s spirit to guide his feet, he rounded the boulder and started to sprint. On his first stride, he took in the situation and raised his spear arm. Atum, crouching by the wounded donkey, his knife at its neck. The girl lying on the ground with Myl bent over her, working at the rope that bound her legs. The leader, water-skin raised to his mouth mid-swallow, eyes bulging at the shadowy figure charging towards him. On his second stride, the traveller hurled his spear at the leader. This close, it was impossible to miss. Water sprayed from his mouth as the spear drove into his gut, knocking the wind from him and sending out a matching spray of blood where it pierced him.

It took two more strides for the traveller to draw his sword. Atum was looking up now and let out a wordless yell as the traveller bore down on him. His grandfather’s spirit must have smiled on him that night, as the traveller flew over the loose rocks where the donkey had foundered only minutes before. By the time Atum was standing upright he scarcely had a moment to blink before the traveller barrelled into him, sword driving into his chest and shield knocking him back, sending him tumbling over the donkey.

The traveller rounded on Myl, who was trying to lift the girl up by her hair so he could hold his sword to her throat.

“Don’t come any—”, he began, but was stopped as the traveller thrust his sword into Myl’s neck. He gurgled and dropped the girl, who let out an outraged grunt.

The traveller was breathing heavily as he looked around. No sign of Khenek. Perhaps he was wise enough to flee instead of trying to avenge his comrades.

He walked back to where the donkey still lay braying, and drove his sword into its heart. As the donkey’s cries faded, the traveller squatted down on his haunches and sighed. “Peace,” he

said, "at last."

At this, the girl squirmed again and made a noise, unable to form words through her gag. The traveller sighed again and walked over to undo the girl's bonds. Before cutting the ropes, he paused for a moment.

"I trust you will not do anything foolish with your newfound freedom?" he asked.

The girl nodded enthusiastically, then caught herself, a confused look on her face, and started to shake her head.

The traveller untied her gag and started sawing at the ropes with his blade.

"Of course I won't do anything foolish," she said, "not since you just saved me. Even if you hadn't, I wouldn't, I mean..."

The girl trailed off as the traveller helped her to her feet. She was slenderly built and not tall. Her long, straight hair had mostly pulled free of her braid, and fell almost to the small of her narrow back.

"What is your name?" she asked as she brushed dust from her silken travelling dress.

He shrugged, "I have none."

"Then what do people call you?" Her soft eyes could have been any colour, but appeared grey in the moonlight.

"They do not call me."

"Then I shall call you Trouble, since you came when none called you," she laughed.

Trouble frowned.

"You are right, that is an ill name," she grimaced. "You rescued me from trouble after all."

"No, it suits me well," said Trouble, who had crouched down again and had begun to rummage through the baggage still tied to the fallen donkey. "And I shall call you Pheasant, since you were caught in a trap and will not cease your noise-making."

"But my name is Hyrste," she cried.

"Be still, Pheasant," said Trouble as he handed her a small canvas sack full of bread. "Hold this, and eat if you will. We will not rest again until dawn."

“What?”

“You are rich, are you not? Or your father is?”

“He rules the city.”

“And he will be happy to see you back safe?”

“I-I’m sure he will be.”

“Good. Then we had best not keep him waiting.” He tossed her another bundle, this one a pair of water skins bound together.

“But it’s dark,” she stammered.

“As Khaed’s arse, as our friend Khenek would say. And if he has any more friends, we do not want them to find us in the light.” Trouble had finished going through the baggage and was tugging at the cloak that was still wrapped around Atum’s corpse.

“Here.” He wrested the cloak free and tossed it to Hyrste. “You’ll want this.”

She stumbled forward as she tried to catch the cloak without dropping either of the bundles and then gave a little gasp as she felt the still-warm blood dripping from the cloak. Trouble took the bread and water from her as she fumbled with the cloak and pushed them into his own pack. He scanned the horizon one more time, seeing nothing but the silhouettes of tall rocks or the odd tree against the shimmering spray of stars that was now strewn across the depthless sea of the night sky.

“It’s time to go.”

* * *

It was past noon the next day before they reached the outlying houses that clustered around the walls of the city of Mour. Hyrste’s stream of complaints about her scraped shins and bruised feet had dried up sometime during the night, but the sight of the bustling city gates buoyed her spirits enough to resume the flow.

“I swear I shall not leave the bathhouse for a week,” she was saying. “I’ll have Renne rub my left foot and Maeran rub my right. Or should I have Renne rub my feet and—”

“Princess!” One of the gate guards was approaching them. “Princess Hyrste, is that you?”

“It is, loyal guardsman,” she replied in a suddenly strong voice. “On behalf of our city, I thank you for your diligence in protecting us all. What is your name?”

“Toumar, my lady.” The guardsman visibly swelled with pride.

“Would you grant me a favour, Toumar?” the princess continued.

“Anything.”

“Will you fetch for us a litter, please? My friend and I have been walking all night.”

“Certainly, my lady. Come, let me clear the way for you.” He turned around and bellowed, “Make way for the princess!” as he led them through the crowded gate.

“You are well-loved, Pheasant,” said Trouble. “Perhaps I should call you Nightingale instead for your pretty words.”

“We are blessed with a pious and loyal people, here in Mour,” she said warmly, smiling at those from the crowd who had stopped to wave and shout.

“And with a kind and beautiful princess who cares for her people,” Toumar interjected. “She worked tirelessly in the temple of healing last summer after those Neldean dogs tried to throw down our walls. My cousin swears it was your touch that saved his leg from festering.”

“You practise the healing arts?” asked Trouble.

“Nothing so difficult as that,” replied Hyrste. “I merely do what all mothers know. Feeding, bathing, changing—sick men need these just as much as babes do. Holy Khaed does the rest, working through his priests.”

“Or despite them,” Toumar muttered, then turned away to growl instructions at a scrawny errand boy who was slouching near the gate.

Hyrste collapsed gratefully into the thinly padded litter when it arrived. Trouble refused the offer. Tired as he was, he was not so weak that other men should carry him. He walked

alongside the litter as they made their way up the crowded streets towards the palace.

“I’m not a mother, you know,” Hyrste said suddenly.

Trouble raised an eyebrow.

“What I said before about bathing and changing. I didn’t want you to think...I mean I’ve never had a babe of my own, only I used to help the nurse maids with my brother when he was born. She died giving birth to him, my mother did.” Hyrste smiled at Trouble, but her eyes were starting to well with tears. “I wanted to be a mother to him, since he had none. I was only ten at the time. Father loved him too, more than anything in the world.” Hyrste was no longer looking at Trouble, but was staring at the skyline ahead where the pale gleaming tops of the palace towers had just come into view. “A fever took him before he spoke his first word.”

Hyrste was still for a long moment, afloat on a tide of memory. An excited call of “Princess!” brought her back, and she waved at the young girl who had called out. Hyrste did not speak for the rest of the trip and neither did she meet Trouble’s eyes, although she continued to smile at those from the crowd who called out to her.

* * *

“Hyrste! You are alive!” High Prince Lykon stood up from his throne in surprise as the weary pair were ushered into the hall. His aquiline face appeared stricken by fear when they first entered, but soon broke into a relieved grin. He descended the dais with arms open wide, and she rushed into his embrace.

“Oh, father,” she wept, “I thought I might never see you again, and you would be all alone.”

“Come my daughter, you must tell me what happened. Who is this man?”

“This is Trouble,” she wiped her tears on a ragged sleeve and sniffed. “He rescued me from those bandits. They killed...” Hyrste struggled to find her voice. “I don’t think they were going

to kill me, really. Only, I didn't know where they were taking me. And we were off in the wilds, leagues from anywhere. But Trouble found me." She smiled again at the name.

"Your men were not useless," said Trouble. "They slew two of the bandits and wounded a third. The blood from that wound left the trail that led me to your daughter."

"And these bandits," asked Lykon. "You killed them?"

"All but one. The wounded man fled into the night when his friends fell."

"He must be brought to justice," announced Lykon. "But you must both be exhausted. We shall feast tonight to celebrate your rescue, but please rest until then." Lykon gestured, and a servant led Trouble to his guest quarters. It would be good to rest here for the day, but getting on the road again tomorrow would feel even better.

* * *

Trouble tried not to grimace as yet another toast was proposed, this time by a man with too much oil in his beard. He would rather have been asleep, like he had been most of the afternoon, but as the guest of honour he was obliged to show his face. At least the wine was good. At last, Lykon stood up to speak. His host's food and lodging had been generous, but Trouble was hoping for a more valuable reward. Travel supplies, or something that could be traded for them. He shifted, uncomfortable in the too-soft silk outfit he had been given to wear while his own clothes were drying after a much-needed wash. He was considering how much the clothes might fetch at market, when Lykon turned to him.

"And so, as a token of our gratitude, I give you this sword, so that all may see your courage." The sword was similar in size to Trouble's own, though crimson tassels hung from the sheath and the hilt was worked with brass. He would have to inspect the blade later. "I also give you this torc, so that all may see the esteem in which the house of Mour holds you." The torc was made

of twisted silver strands, and set with black chalcedony.

"You are too generous, Lord Prince," Trouble stood as he accepted the gifts. "I shall wear them with pride." The delay had been worth it after all, although it would be prudent to wait and sell the gifts in the next city.

"Furthermore," Lykon continued as Trouble returned to his seat, "having seen the valour with which you have protected our beloved princess, I hereby appoint you to be her chief bodyguard, with all the honours and rewards that position entails."

For the blink of an eye, Trouble froze. This was unexpected. Inconvenient. Lykon had not consulted with him about this. "You honour me too highly, Lord Prince." Did he think a road-dusty wanderer would only be all too grateful to enter his service? The cheers of approval from the rest of the hall told Trouble it would not be seemly to refuse now. He would have to leave very early in the morning, no, tonight would be best. Before he became too entangled.

* * *

Trouble cursed silently as he bundled his still-dripping travel clothes into his sack. He had spent far too long searching the palace's back corridors for the laundry's drying racks, and now had to find his way out again. He decided against raiding the kitchens on his way out. Some of the food he had taken from Hyrste's donkey still remained, and he had surreptitiously pocketed some refreshments from earlier in the day, too. Surely there would be a well in the city where he could refill his water skins.

He turned a corner in the corridor and found an open window that looked out onto a narrow alleyway. This would do. He was still on the second storey, but a short ledge protruded from the outside of the plastered wall about a fathom below the windowsill. Trouble was beginning to climb through the window when a door below opened and a hooded figure stepped out. Another figure approached out of the shadows of the nearby buildings. Trouble hurriedly slipped back inside as one of the men be-

gan to speak.

“Your men failed,” growled the first man. It was Lykon.

“Do you think I am unaware?” asked the second. He had a rasping voice, like one who had been strangled but survived. “That is why I am speaking to you now.”

“You’ve heard the story? This man Trouble killed them. Not all of them, though. One escaped. Was he the one who told you?”

“No. The fool tried to flee.”

“We cannot have any loose ends.”

“He is being dealt with. I have other servants.” The man’s chuckle sounded like bone scraping on bone.

“And Trouble. He is a loose end too. I’ve set him to guard the girl, so when you take her, be sure to deal with him too. We’ll set up another outing, but it can’t be for another few months. I’ll have to make a show of hunting for bandits in the meantime.”

“No, we must take her tonight.”

“Tonight? It is too soon. The people will be suspicious. You know how much they love her.”

“The people are fools. Tell them Trouble was a Neldean spy who has kidnapped her. We cannot delay. These things have a time, which is fast approaching, and I have made many preparations already.”

“And what, we carry them off, us two?”

“Do not be a fool. You will be of no use. I will do it. As I said, I have other servants.”

“You’ll invite no foul spirits into my house, sorcerer.”

“I’ll do what I must. Do not forget that this is for your benefit. Do you want to keep your throne or not?”

Lykon was silent.

“I thought so. Step closer, and I will cloak us in shadow. Then, you will show me to where the man Trouble sleeps and return to your chambers.”

Lykon stepped toward, and Trouble’s mind began to race. It would do no good to flee now. If Lykon’s charioteers did not catch him, the sorcerer’s shadowy servants would. The hunt would begin as soon as they found his room empty.

He raced back down the corridor, moving as fast as he could without making noise. Surely the sorcerer's spell would take some time to cast. They would be in no great hurry either. He should be able to reach his room with enough time to set an ambush. The sorcerer would be most distracted in the moment he passed through the doorway. That would be his chance.

Trouble slipped through the doorway and took stock of the room. Silver moonlight streamed through a window into the modest sitting room, perhaps three paces by five. The sleeping alcove was hidden by embroidered curtains which just now began to billow despite the still air. A ghostly figure emerged.

"Hyrste?" he hissed. The princess was clad in a pale nightgown that formed a corona around her silhouette.

"Trouble," her soft voice brimmed with feeling. "I feared you had left. I never got to thank you properly."

"Hush, and hide yourself away," he whispered.

She looked hurt.

"Your father is coming to kill me. His sorcerer too."

"His sorcerer? But—"

"*Hist*," he interrupted her, shoving his pack into her arms and pushing her back into the alcove. "I want not a breath from you. For the sake of both our lives." He let the curtains fall back to obscure her pale and frightened face.

He took his place behind the door and strained to listen. Every heartbeat seemed an eternity. How many did he have left before the sorcerer arrived? Was there nothing else he could do to prepare? There was no better hiding place in the room. Perhaps if he'd had the time to fix a ledge above the door frame...

The muffled sounds of footsteps drifted through the door. They were here. Trouble willed his heart to steady its wild drumbeat. Murmuring outside. He could not make out the words. A rustle and footsteps receding. The door began to glide open.

Trouble held his breath as a haze began to taint the moonlit floor before the doorway. Not a darkness, but an absence of vision. The haze thickened as soft footsteps sounded just on the other side of the open door. One, two, three. Trouble could no

longer make out any detail of the room past the edge of the door. Now.

He lunged silently, his sword point leading the way, driving into the heart of the void. He felt the blade glance off metal, though he could not see what. His momentum carried him forward and he collided into something, *someone*, staggered and whirled around, slashing wildly at shoulder height but slicing only the air. Had the sorcerer fallen? He regained his footing and stepped into a downward thrust. As he leaned forward to push the blade down, an icy hand grabbed his sandalled ankle. The pull of the grasping hand threw off his balance enough to rob his thrust of its strength, but not enough to topple him completely. The blade bit into a substance that could not have been flesh, and the sorcerer convulsed, letting out a breathy, wordless snarl of anger. It was all Trouble could do to keep a grip on his sword as the unrelenting hand about his leg pulled with inhuman force. He toppled over as his sword pulled free, flicking black tarry gobbets across the room.

The aura of unseeing was dissipating now, and Trouble could see the outline of the rising figure silhouetted against the window, the bright moon perversely shining through a hole in the sorcerer's chest that Trouble's sword had pierced. Lying on his back and still held by the ankle, Trouble doubled forward, drawing himself toward the monstrosity with a two-handed overhead swing. The sorcerer brought up his other arm to block the blow, and the resulting crash of impact resounded off the close walls. Trouble's sword had cracked at the blow, but the sorcerer's arm was whole. Pivoting once like an athlete, the sorcerer spun Trouble around and sent him hurling into the wall.

The room had not stopped spinning. Trouble opened his eyes and forced them to focus on the flickering golden shapes in front of him. Someone was speaking.

"...wake the whole palace. Have you finished him?"

"Not yet. He was trying to live up to his name." The sorcerer was speaking to Lykon, who stood in the doorway holding a lamp. "I think I may keep this one. It would be a shame to let

such a capable soul escape.”

“If he were capable, you’d be dead.”

The sorcerer laughed and started tugging at the torn robe that hung from his body. “True, he is not so capable as that. I do not believe there is a mortal man alive who could end me.” He ripped the tattered cloth free, exposing his body to the lamp’s light.

He laughed again. “Do not look so disgusted, Lykon. This is the immortality you desired so much.” The lips and tongue that spoke were still made of human flesh, as was his face and glimmering eyes. Instead of a neck, the sorcerer’s head rested on a pillar of bundled tubes. Thick and black, they emerged from beneath his chin and ran down into a broad bronze cage, a mockery of a man’s ribs. His arms and legs were likewise formed of spars of bronze, wrapped in more surging tubes that twitched and pulled like so many worms.

“I...no...”

“You did not think I would give you a magic potion, did you? An elixir of youth? Your new body awaits, all it needs now is the soul of your daughter to animate it.”

“But how could I rule the city like that?”

“How could you rule as you are? You would soon die and leave no heir, were it not for me, and that would be the end of it. This is everything you wanted.”

The sorcerer strode over to the window. “Do something useful and drag the body over here,” he told the stunned prince. “I must call my servants.” He turned and began a dry and breathy chant, speaking forth inscrutable syllables to be carried away on the cool air.

Trouble let his eyelids droop, feigning unconsciousness as Lykon stepped forward and closed the door behind him. He could kill Lykon by surprise, perhaps. What remained of his sword was still at hand, a jagged spike of bronze still attached to the hilt. The sorcerer was another matter. He had failed to kill the monster once already. Would he have any more luck with a broken sword? Through lowered eyelashes he saw the alcove curtains part.

Princess Hyrste darted out from the curtains, clutching in both hands the sword that Lykon had given to Trouble earlier that night, and lunging wildly at the chanting sorcerer. In the same heartbeat, Trouble surged upward, thrusting his own broken blade up under Lykon's ribcage and into his heart. The sorcerer caught the princess's blade in one glistening hand, but not before its point had drawn a line across his face. A line now welling with red blood, as bright as the torrent that flowed from Lykon's chest as Trouble pulled his sword free. Grabbing Hyrste by the neck with his other hand, the sorcerer wrenched the sword out of her grip and flung it to the ground. He began to turn as Trouble rushed towards him, trying to interpose the princess between himself and Trouble's desperate attack, but he could not move quickly enough. Trouble closed the distance and, grasping the sorcerer's bronze-plated scalp in one hand, he pierced the soft skin below the sorcerer's jawline, stabbing upward into his brain.

The sorcerer's body thrashed, flinging both Hyrste and Trouble free. Despite the flailing limbs, his face was slack. He collapsed into a twitching heap, the tremors growing weaker as the ghost of his strength fled at last.

Hyrste looked around the room, stunned. Then, noticing her father's corpse for the first time, cried out "Father," and ran to it weeping.

Trouble wearily climbed to his feet. "Why do you weep for the man," he sighed as he went over to pick up his pack. "He would have sacrificed your life had I not killed him first."

"But I loved him," she sobbed. "He wouldn't...he wouldn't." She continued repeating the phrase to herself as Trouble stooped to collect the gifted sword. He wiped it on the sorcerer's fallen robe, then returned it to its sheath.

"For saving my life," he said, and placed the sword next to the grieving princess. She did not look up. "I wish you well, High Princess," he said, and left.

* * *

As the pre-dawn glow started to fill the long broad valley with light, Trouble bedded down in the shelter of a wild olive tree for a few hours' rest. He tried not to think about what would happen to the city or the princess when morning broke. It was not his business and they were not his people. He looked out to the west where hills lined the still-dark horizon. Somewhere beyond them he dreamed, his own people lived.