

# Vidby

*by /a/non*

# I

## Vidby the Thief

Vidby was nervous and he ought to be. He looked to be little more than a boy of twelve although in truth he was a man. He lurched in the back of the wagon as his partner in this crime guided their cart, pulled by a single ass. It was just him and three other boys. All thin, all small.

And they were on their way to be sold to the wizard. Vidby did his best not to think of what the wizard would be doing with the boys, the other ones. He knew the kinds of perversion that men liked. It took hours, out of the city, into the country into the quagmire that housed the wizard's tower. As they headed down the hill into the swamp Vidby could see the tower and for a moment, he thought he could see the wizard himself. Staring at him from the top, but it must surely be his mind run wild.

When they finally arrived at the tower, Vidby wondered how the thing stood at all. It was visibly crooked and as a result had juts to one side or the other to keep its precarious balance. Here and there were awkward balconies and windows. When his partner approached the tower, he did the strangest things. Walking backward, clapping and shouting "Hey Dol and a Soul, Merry Meet I bring friends as bidden." He did that three times before coaching the boys how to do it themselves.

Wizards were a tricky lot and Vidby could only presume from the fervor his partner in thievery had deployed in getting all of the boys to do the actions, say the words at the right time that whatever it prevented must be very bad. After having passed that invisible barrier his partner, an older man the age of 30 or so called up. "Magister, I have brought your shipment as we agreed. I have paid my respects as instructed as have the boys."

And with the mention of boys Vidby was certain he could

hear the tower itself moving. Soon there was other noises, cursing and muttering and a rotten wooden door from the side of the tower opened. There was an old man, 40 or more, his hair a mess, wearing clothes so dirty that even beggars would not have touched them. "All of them?" he asked in a high pitched, almost panicky voice. Vidby didn't know why the Wizard kept such a pathetic servant.

"Ayyy Magister, as agreed." His partner was bowing low, lower than Vidby had ever seen him do. When the man had approached Vidby, it was for a job. A secret job. Soon the man was smacking the children around Vidby forcing them to bow and low. Vidby glared when his partner clapped him hard enough to make him see stars and forced him to bow. This was all according to plan. He would be sent with the other boys for whatever noncery the wizard demanded and then Vidby would slip away. He was good at that. Going unnoticed, even when he was right in front of your nose.

His partner stood and the Wizards Servant was suddenly upon them, stinking of filth. Vidby thought that this was the first time he had seen the older man scared. Vidby thought he could smell it on the man for a second but noticed the tremor in his partner's leg. An old tell but a true one. The grimed man pressed an equally dirty bag into his partner's hand. This was according to plan. Vidby could smell the servants breathe as he muttered "Don't open it before you get back to town or it will be the last thing you do for me."

Vidby was confused, was this wretch, who would put even beggars to shame in appearance and slovenliness actually the wizard. His partner nodded and bowed and soon the Ass and the Cart, now empty of its cargo was leaving just as fast as he could haul the donkey. And the animal for once offered no objection. Soon it was just Vidby and the boys and the wizard.

"Come," the wizard intoned and Vidby watched in amazement as his legs followed. The boys walked in lock step into the tower and the rotten first floor. Vidby thought back to asking his partner about the wizards magics but it had never occurred to

either of them that he could simply move their legs, command their bodies as easily as a man might wiggle his own fingers. They walked in, controlled by the hands of the man that Vidby had no doubt now was the wizard he had been sent to steal from.

They were lead through a bottom dirty storeroom that seemed to beg for Vidby's attention and then upwards, up a narrow staircase switching back over itself past a second and third floor until finally they reached the forth floor. Vidby realized that this must be the highest that he had stood in a building. It never occurred to him to think that the Wizards tower was the tallest building in miles and miles.

Past the first floor things had gotten cleaner, as if the first was just for show or for shock. When they found themselves in a little room, a rack of bunks shoved against the wall and smaller tables and such, not sized for kids but too small for adults sat about the floor. "Here, you will wait in this room until I come to get you." the Wizard said sharply and everyone felt his control over them stop. Just as swiftly as it had come.

Only Vidby asked "Why?" and watched as the wizards eyes moved over and focused on him. The eyes would twitch and focus, twitch and focus as if trying to comprehend that the filth had just talked to him. "Because, I am a Wizard and I said so," sai the bedraggled wizard, who looked more like a poor man after his debt collectors had dragged him down a shit filled street. After a moment, as if realizing that such a statement may not be enough for little boys the grimy wizard added. "I have a ferocious beast, and it prowls these halls. It will rip the flesh off your bones. And braid your eyeballs into your hair." The wizard nodded as if that ended that. Vidby nodded, trying not to imagine how you could braid an eyeball.

"Eat, Children," the Wizard nodded, and with his mucky hands waved and suddenly the tables, small and odd that they were, were filled with Bread and Barley sweets, Honeyed Teas and goat milk. Vidby was amazed. The food had not been there and now it was. Just another sign of the wizard's power, Vidby had begun to think he was a fool for coming here to steal from

this filth in the shape of a man.

But he knew that he didn't want to stay and find out what had happened to the other boys. There were regular shipments of waifs and children out here. The wizard's tower had become a byword for the terrors that adults inflict upon children in their little village. Vidby moved to sit and eat the same as the rest. None of them could remember ever seeing so much food or it looking so good. The wizard nodded again, to himself and left, Closing the door behind him.

Vidby waited for the long count of a dozen then crept to the door and listened as the other boys ate and stuffed their faces. He turned back and started seeing the signs. He wiped whatever crumbs he had had touched on his pants as the boys began nodding off, on the floor or in their seats. "Just as easy to poison as to feed," Vidby said softly. He waited a long time before opening the door to find the hallway empty. This was what he wanted. A chance to explore, to find the fabulous wealth of the wizard and steal it.

Vidby thought of the bottom floors, the storerooms he had walked through before thinking better of it. He instead crept up the stairs, wincing as they squeaked and shifted. The Wizard had mentioned a beast but Vidby saw nothing of one. He snuck up the stairs and found rooms and halls, many of them. He crept along fearing greatly being found by the wizard. He finally found a room that looked like it might be a study or a display room. He could see books and knick knacks and jewelled things. He didn't hear the woman behind him and nearly shrieked when she bent down and brought her lips nearly to his ears when she asked "What are you doing?" which sent a peculiar thrill through him.

Vidby pivoted on his heel and then planting his feet but continuing the motion in his upper body did his best to wallop her in the guts, but she stepped back quickly. "I supposed I deserved that," she said a smile on her face, like a cat with a mouse. "What are you looking for little boy..." she said trailing off before stepping in and grabbing him by the cheeks. She was stronger than she looked, she looked scrawny, like all her weight had gone to

her ass and stuck there. Still now she had him by the cheeks, keeping him from saying much or getting away. “No, not a little boy, I think,” she said as if disappointed. “A man, small though, tougher than you look too.”

Vidby looked at her face and he found her plain. She had wide eyes and cheekbones and probably the nicest thing about her was her smile and it wasn't saying much. Jerking out of his grasp he asked in a low voice, “Are you going to tell him?” and the woman looked considering for a long moment, before shaking her head. “He told me to watch out for boys, and you are not a boy.” Vidby took that as his cue and slipped into the study, doing his best to forget about the strange lady. She stood there for a minute, licking her lips as if remembering something tasty before backing off and walking away. Vidby checked outside the room again after a moment and looked back out only in time to watch her behind as she turned to go back down the stairs. “This is a madhouse, surely,” Vidby said to himself as he reentered the study. The air smelled of dust and more dust. A thick coating was applied to everything thick enough to show his every fingerprint and footprint but not thick enough to hide the jewels that sat on display.

Vidby tried to be fast but the room was full of books. How was he to know which ones would be valuable. He tried to pull out a few and they resisted as if they had stuck together in their moldiness. Leaving them for a moment he tried his hands at the display pieces and found them equally stuck to, as if someone had poured gruel over everything and let it set in that. He had no tools and his only options were to break something or stick to the books.

Vidby was pondering how long it would take his little legs to get out of this place when he heard a harrumph from the hallway and he recognized the wizards voice. “Damnable Succubus, is it the time already?” The footsteps came closer and closer. Vidby hid in a corner holding his breath as the footsteps seemed to almost be on top of him and then the started going further away. Vidby's absence would be found soon if the woman hadn't reported him already. Vidby waited for a long moment and then

kicked over the stand of the most valuable thing he could lay eyes on, a pendant with flat ruby in it, as big as his fist. The case and stand shattered on the floor and Vidby grabbed the ruby and went to run, when pain started to radiate up his arm. The amulet was still on the floor but his hand was bloody. Bleeding, he was bleeding. It was dripping down his hand and it seemed to be pouring on the dirt on the floor, splotching the dirty floor in dark spots. Vidby rubbed his hand for a long moment before realizing his last two fingers were gone. The pain had just begun, the radiating crushing sort of pain that only comes from being very hot or very cold.

Vidby did his best to ignore the pain but it kept growing. He tried to walk but he doubled over from from the pain and he thought he would throw up. He could still see his blood flowing freely from his hand. Vidby jabbed his hand, or the stump of his missing fingers as hard as he could into his pants and nearly screamed, tears rolling unbidden down his face. Vidby cursed to himself, he would not go empty handed.

Grabbing the Amulet by the chain this time and realizing he would have to bolt for the door as he realized he was so sick to his stomach he could barely walk. Vidby walked as best he could, with the ruby clutched in one hand and the other bleeding he held painfully to his side. Vidby stepped to the stairs, taking them quietly, hoping that the blood would not give him away or lead a trail to him. He would just have to run, he realized. So Vidby started down the stairs. Past the hallways, past the studies, past the room of the little boys whose door was still locked shut. The woman was standing there now, Facing the door as if daring for any of the boys to open it. She gave him a wink as he continued down the stairs.

He was soon back in the grimey warehouse that was the first couple of floors and the smell of something wrong hit him. It didn't smell like shit, it smelled like. He saw the wizard then, sitting by the door. He tried to run, he didn't get far. He didn't know if the wizard made him collapse or his own blood loss did that. His face at the floor as he passed out, was mere feet in front

of the wizard.

When he came to he was in a room that looked more like a farmer's front room than the storeroom he remembered. He had been cleaned and his hand still hurt. "The pain will never leave you, it's one of the prices that you will pay for its magic," the wizard told him. The Wizard, much like the storeroom, had changed. He was merely an older man now, his beard and hair full and wild but there was a smile there that made Vidby think of a gambler. He positively glowed in the sunlight of the room. "Whysit different," Vidby asked feeling half sick.

"You're awakening to a new world, strong willed, lucky, and more than a little dumb. What a world it is going to be for you." The wizard said it, without much trace of emotion. He didn't seem upset that Vidby had tried to steal from him. Vidby realized that his words were half slurring, as if he had drunk wine and was now just sobering up.

"Whatdid yadota me," he slurred out. But the wizard just shook his head.

"You did that to yourself lad, the consuming crimson, It's a flawed school of magic, one that demanded sacrifice, but powerful for what it is," the wizard stopped and looked kindly for a moment, "The reason that you feel the way that you do is that the magic is settling in, you can see through the glamour I had cast, you can feel the magic now I wager. Two fingers is a lot for a nobody. Most Consumption mages would feed only a single knuckle maybe two until they reached their third or fourth decade at least.

Vidby held up his hand, which had been cleaned. It wasn't red anymore. A splotch of pink covered where the base of his fingers had been. It still hurt like hell but it wasn't bleeding. He felt sick to his stomach. "It ate my fingers?" he flatly asked. And the wizard nodded.

"And it will eat more too. It's full for now but it will grow hungry again, always offering more magic, for more flesh. Vidby looked down and saw he was wearing the ruby pendent, under his shirt and panicked for a moment, fumbling it out, fear it



would rip a hole in his chest or his neck. "And just like that, safe," the wizard said as he handled the ruby. He could feel the magic radiating off it now like body heat. "Probably be years before it feeds again," the wizard nodded, "but don't forget that it will."

He called up irritably to the upstairs and the woman flounced down the stairs "Berelaine, make this kid a basket and get him out of here." The wizard watched as Berelaine moved around the fire, always seeming to find something, food just out of sight. Vidby couldn't quite figure out where she was getting it from or at least not yet. The wizard watched as the Succubus moved and soon a right proper basket was made. "I don't eat that well myself Berelaine," to which Berelaine only dipped her head a little as if caught blushing. "He is a man my master, they must be fed properly if they are to attain their full size." The wizard scoffed asking "Am I not to attain my full size." and Berelaine snapped back "You are a wizard, it is a different." Soon they stood, looking more like married farmers than a wizard and his fantastic beast.

"Why are you letting me go?" Vidby asked his slurring seemingly almost gone. The wizard leaned up against the wall. "When you get to my age, things happen for a reason," and after a thoughtful few minutes, "Besides, just think of all the chaos you'll cause." The wizard nodded to Berelaine who kindly but firmly helped him gather his basket, which he saw was full of breads and meats and a capped beer stein bringing him to the door like a mother would a child stopping only for a moment, to bend down and kiss on him high up on his head, almost in his hair.

It left Vidby with a rather nice view of her cleavage which, he had to say, seemed more considerable now. When he felt the heat on his forehead suddenly burn he pulled away and he could see the barest trace of his blood on her lips. The way she licked it off, robbed him of his reason for a moment and he fumbled his way out the door. Soon he was out of the tower, with a basket and a ruby and he had no idea what to do next, but he would be damned if stayed here for the wizard to change his mind.

## II

### Vidby the Bridegroom

Vidby looked down at his hand, his two fingers and the rest of his hand looked back to him. Covered in the same cauterization marks that had nearly killed him at the time, or he guessed it was the blood poisoning that had almost killed him. And here he was now, at the ripe age of twenty and about to get married.

Vidby adjusted his armor, It was dirty, stiff and unyielding. It stank of dried blood but it was the enchantment that was important. Vidby in the years since he had paid his price of admission to this world of magic and enchantment, had sat down and taken notes. His partner betraying him had been expected, Vidby hadn't realized just what he was stealing until it had happened. A real magical artifact.

Vidby was still figuring the full use of that power. The amulet of consumption as the Wizard had called it, seemed to want him to understand. For a long time he didn't know what he was doing. When he had reached out two whispers of magic, that were as solid and real as any cord any appendage, he had known what he was doing. He could feel those cords, his missing fingers. Vidby hadn't expected the gurgling and crying and the drumming of his partner's heels as his two fingers strangled him like a lariat to his death.

Vidby had told himself at the time that he did now know what he had expected but he knew. The magic of his fingers, the missing fingers was controlled by his intentions and will, the same as his other body parts. Vidby watched his partner, hung by the magic he controlled, gasp and gurgle and end up black in the face, with a lurid black tongue swole up in his mouth. Vidby could still remember it, the thin gurgle as the last of the air was expelled from him after he dropped him. There was no blood, no one had

any way to connect it to him, but he knew. Vidby had Sworn never to do that again at the time, it had nightmares but it wasn't long before it happened again. Before he killed with magic, over and over again.

Snapping back to focus, Vidby touched the ruby as if to make sure it was there, on his chest, under his armor. It wasn't long after that, that the ruby had begun instructing him, in his dreams, when he focused. He could still feel his fingers, that they were part of him. That the flesh was missing but the sensation was not. There was so much more he could do with the amulet instead of just murdering people and he was going to accomplish something with his life. He was going to be Important.

Reaching out with his power he focused and the air around him, moved it with his will, as if stirred by two giant fingers. There was so much he could do but right now, all he wanted to do was intimidate. So a breeze was enough, just enough to remind the people watching him. He had the power and they did not.

He walked into the chapel and he saw his henchmen leading up against walls, they took their feet. They were only mercenaries, only there for the coin but Vidby did not mind that. It made them easy to motivate. One of the men, some shitstain missing his front teeth offered up a 'Con-Grat-Ul-ations M'Lord' and Vidby took him laying his good arm and hand over his shoulders and holding him there. The man almost looked like he was going to wince but Vidby eased up. "Thank you, Soldier. Celebrate, it's a Celebration!" and Vidby waved his two nonexistent fingers, he moved them and the amulet reacted. There was the plinking sound of coins dropping. He was using his magic to summon golden coins, well mostly golden.

The Coins were a rosy gold color, but his men knew that by now they were worth half their weight in gold and the rest in copper where the rosy color came from. It was good enough for them. They scampered about, cheering and collecting coins off the floor and as they appeared in the air. He leaned in to tell his man, "Go make sure the priest is ready and that her father

is there. It's time to make it official."

Where the Dashing Lord Vidby had come from and his seemingly endless chests of Roseygold had been the hot topic among the nobles of the kingdom, if you could call it that. It had seemed so grand from far away when he was a kid, and now he knew it was the jumped up domain of a Marquis and a Count that the larger countries had never bothered claiming, mostly on the account of nothing of value came out of there. No gold mines, no silver, no coal, no iron, the women did not brew or mill or weave the men did not fight, or at least not well. It had been why his roguish coins had been so effective. It was the land of his youth and like his youth, it was misspent and to be discarded, but not before he extracted every inch of use out of its rotting hide.

He watched as the henchmen disappeared into the chapel and more of his soldiers came, no doubt drawn by the idea of gold. There were even a few women there, Camp doxies Vidby guessed by their pocked faces. Even the whores here were not much. It had barely taken him two companies, not even 200 men to murder his way past the Viscounts and Lords of the Land, He had no interest in the capital such as it was, but he had instead seized the 'royal grounds'. Little more than a lord's manor and servant houses and a chapel.

And all that was left was to take his prize. It was not the life of the poor backwoods County that ruled these lands, it was the hand of his daughter, who also had a bloodline going back to her mother's country. It was quite wasted here, but it would be a start. Vidby imagined that those lands might be more of a challenge and he aimed to make sure his foothold there was established there before he even stepped foot into those lands.

Waving to his mercenaries, when he turned around and was surprised when some of them started playing a wedding march, it was a tin whistle and some drums but it was his wedding march. Taking a moment he stepped into the hall, his merry band of murderers behind him. He could see his henchmen now, making sure the priest was there, the priest who was now sporting a black eye and whose holy vestments were now ripped in

places were the gold decorations had been ripped off by some quick fingered men of his.

“Where’s her father,” Vidby growled as someone dragged him up. The father had more than a black eye, and Vidby took over from his enthusiastic underlings. Pulling out a rag from his pocket and spitting on it before starting to clean up the old man’s face. Vidby could see the defiance on the man’s face. “I will never...” and Vidby pulled him in with his good hand. “Listen to me you old fart, if you don’t give your daughter to me. She will be of no further use to me. And if she is of no use to me, the only value she would have to me, is as a plaything for my men.” Vidby put his hand on the man’s swollen cheeks and smiled when he winced. Vidby waited until he caught the man’s gaze in his again. “Have you ever seen a woman, who’s been torn apart by the men’s enjoyment. Ripped open, her insides falling out, her teeth knocked out, beaten so bad around the face that she’ll never see again.”

Vidby let the question settle in the man’s mind . He moved to the side so he could see his daughter. She was pretty in a plain way Vidby guessed. He had said it quietly, but he wasn’t sure if his men had heard or not or just reacted to his stance. There were snickers from behind, not nice ones, hungry ones, cruel ones. And Vidby could see that the old lord would give him no further trouble. He had not figured him for a sentimental one, to love his daughter.

So they strode up and talked to the priest. The priest seemed to want to sink into himself. He jumped every time his mercenaries cheered, which was often, he said his vows and Vidby could see him mouthing to the girl “I’m sorry they’ll kill me, they’ll kill you,” when he thought Vidby was not looking. He didn’t care. The sooner that the girl understood this the better. When the priest finally announced him, Husband, under the eyes of the gods and grace and her father there was a big cheer. Vidby asked in a low voice, “Is that it, is it official?” and the priest nodded.

“To the Town Square!” Vidby shouted. His day was just start-

ing after all. If his new Father was going to cede his title and lordship to Vidby it had to be done publicly. So they marched, his wedding processing. The men loyal to the lord made a few attempts to stop him. At once point even mustered a company, almost 50 men to fight his 200. Vidby rarely showed off, he considered it something of a character flaw, like a wart on the end of a beautiful person's nose. But he cried out "Behold, the might of Vidby!" and for a long moment reached up to the heavens with his two fingers. A few sling stones scattered about to the pavement before he pulled his hand down and with it, two streaks of lightening crashed down. Blasting the men. Scattering men and wood alike easily. His men were on them in minutes. Clubbing the rest down, taking their coin, scavenging for boots or shields or a belt or armor before the men even realized they were defeated.

To say that the Village square was empty was an understatement. It was dead empty. So again his men, went out and soon more lasses, kids, men to old to fight were gathered. While Vidby waited, he pulled his knife and told his wife "You might as well start undressing, it would be a shame to have to cut that dress off of you." Her father tried to respond but was flummoxed.

"There there, almost over. Father just one last thing for you to do and the first one for your daughter." Vidby laughed a mean laugh. He had sometimes been told that, but Vidby wasn't sure he had a nice one. He began walking to his wife, knife in hand when she stood up and got in his face. She had a fierceness he had not expected. "I'LL KILL MYSELF I'LL DO IT I'LL END THIS," and Vidby rather flatly said "No you won't" before slapping her hard enough that some in the crowd gasped. He looked down at the woman, who seemed to be in shock. Perhaps it was for the best.

He dragged that knife over her face a bit harsher then he intended. The cut, flat, horizontal on her cheekbone. It bled but she did not cry. She even undressed herself, out of concern for her dress more then anything else Vidby guessed. Once the crowd was gathered what he had to do was short, although as is

in the way of men when he retold the story it was much longer. He fucked his wife in front of them, in front of everyone. "This woman is my wife, as attested by priest, and witness and her father." There was no word from anyone in the crowd. "Attend her and my Father," who recited the words, "I the count, have approved and witness the consumation of this marriage, do declare Vidby of the Roseygolds to be married into the family and my sole heir." There was no cheer, only the whimpering of some people in the crowd and the bay of an old hound.

### III

## Vidby The Bloodgold

Vidby Bloodgold, it's what they called him. He didn't mind, Technically he was only a viceroy to the King, but everyone knew he was the power behind the throne, everyone knew that his coin was marked in blood, What was left of his arm hung raggedly at his side. He could feel his arm, it was a crushing kind of pain but all that was left was scraps of flesh hanging from his shoulder. The arm was still there, in his mind. The only time it stopped paining him was when he was casting. He almost felt whole during those times.

His clerk looked at him dourly. He was one of the lovers of children that had been too well positioned and too well connected for Vidby to just tear apart. So he got a first hand seat to Vidby and his power. Sooner or later Vidby would break the man's neck. He would have already if the man hadn't been an accomplished accountant. The two men looked at each other, detested each other, but they made a good team. He had his hands well hand he supposed on every pulse of coin in the kingdom. His taxmen had brought a kingdom that was on the verge of collapse into wealth and prosperity.

And the fact that they had debtors gaol most of the commoners who had thought that they would escape his attention by virtue of being only craftsmen. There were more of course, you couldn't arrest everyone, you needed an enemy after all. A real enemy, not his more clandestine operations. He took his cuts from the official guilds of course, the armsmen and the magisters, the nobles. How it must gall them to hand him chest over chest of their coin.

"Have you found it?" Vidby asked and his dour accountant nodded, "Ayy, the Arm of Tichroma, some sort of cursed relic,



we have it crated in the warehouse.” Vidby gritted his teeth and he could feel his arm, every flesh raked, bone shattered, his skin scraping along the length of it. It felt like someone was separating the strands of his stump and nailing it to a board.

It was electric, and the magic it produced as sublime. There was a pressure around his little accountant, as if he was being caressed by a hundred fingers. “Let’s go.” The accountant nodded but it was a little too slow. Vidby smiled through the pain, and let the fat man go.

It was a little less than an hour before he was in front of the crate. His assistant was beginning to sweat, there was something planned here. Vidby didn’t know what but he needed this fat fucking pedophile to see who was in charge.

The fat man looked like a blanched vegetable, pale and wet. The first attack was fast. Vidby turned his back to the crate, he now knew what he had suspected. The crate was a distraction, the arrow thudded into the crate just missing him, thunked into the wood with enough force to bury the arrowhead into the wooden crate. Vidby listened as something caused the arrow to smoke and bubble as well. Vidby spread his arm wide as he took in the scene.

There were more than a dozen attackers, all wearing dark clothes, short horn bows in the southern style, all young men. Vidby didn’t recognize them and he had more experience with assassins than most. “Outsiders,” Vidby thought as he smiled and spread gestured with his remaining arm. His fat accountant friend positively seems to be steaming as he yelped. It was a barb through the fat man’s foot, affixing him in place. It was a simple spell, brutal as if you had ran your foot through a blunt nail, but it was effective.

Vidby put the fuckers whimpers out of mind as he began deflecting arrows. He didn’t bother trying to send the arrows back, it was enough just to protect himself. After two dozen more arrows, his assailants dropped their bows and drew strange blunt cleavers. “Someone with enough magical prowess to equip a dozen assassins in the same equipment.” He murmured to him-

self, as they closed they struck with a force that surprised Vidby.

The cleaver for half a dozen of them was hanging only inches from his flesh. To the untrained eye it would look like they were just pretending or playing. As if it was a rehearsed movement but Vidby could see the dozens of fingers holding wrists, arms and elbows. He could see the killing intent in his assassins' eyes. His Fingers had saved him. It was only an instant later that the assassins were flung away.

The next wave of attackers didn't get as close, He could hear their arms and bones breaking but they were standing again in seconds. That should have been enough to keep them from moving. Vidby noted the pain dampening magic as he blasted the rest of his attackers across the warehouse. The attack continued but their strength was broken. Vidby battered them, before pinning them to the floor like his accountant.

It was over in less than 5 minutes. "Really southerners? I'm a little offended, accountant," he said as put his arm around the fat little man. He hadn't been touched but there was blood on his robes. Not his blood. The accountant shrieked at the touch, even louder when he asked him, "So who paid for all of this?" It took a long time for the account to calm down, to convince him that Vidby wasn't going to kill him. Especially when he was, just as soon as the fat little man stopped being useful. Vidby let up on the man, not wanting to break him past the point of usefulness. Vidby took his time to see the carnage left by the attack, the dozen bodies. It brought a smile to his lips, a little chuckle to his throat. The account was saying "The roseygold supporters and rebels to the south," hoarsely as if he had repeated himself for some time, Vidby didn't remember for how long.

"Now watch what happens to people who cross me." Vidby withdrew his fingers and brought his good arm up in front of his betraying assistant. It was just a single gesture. A thrust upwards of his single remaining hand. The screaming had just begun, His dozen assailents were picked up, and then pierced with a spear made of blood and magic. He left them there screaming as the spear snaked out and spread through their guts, frying

their nerves. Keeping them alive.

Vidby didn't know how long they would live like this. He was hoping to find out "Come along accountant, I need to rearrange my black market investments if shit like this can happen." Vidby stopped for a moment to let the little fat man empty his guts noisily as he began weeping. He then followed, limping after him, whimpering, covering his ears as the wailing began.

## IV

### Vidby the Emperor

Vidby smiled, today was the day. He had dressed in his very best, velvets and lace, His face painted with the whites and rouges that had come to symbolize his reign. His very expensive wig, made with the finest of unicorn hair sat on his head, the ribbons. No one seemed to get his sense of humor, He enjoyed watching them squirm, to follow his example, mindlessly. It was an obedience that he couldn't even expect out of his serfs and slaves. Vidby tented his fingers, an act that he had never stopped enjoying after recovering the Arm of Tichroma. Where his left arm had once hung and been absent from decades there now was a delicate gold filigree approximation of an arm, his missing arm. He could move it as naturally as his other one, and most importantly it had stopped the pain from his amulet but not the magic.

It didn't look organic. It had about the same volume as a skeleton arm but was only about the width of his thumb in rectangular bars that seemed to be made of smaller almost organic gold shapes shoved into the shape of a bar. It was from after the age of consumption magic, his organic hand felt his chest and found the ruby there. He lifted it up. He had had to shatter the ruby to install the arm. It had left him without his magic.

For a time. The Arm of Tichroma, in the same way it had repaired and was repairing him had done the same to the ruby. The ruby's shattered form had been repaired with gold itself, now truly the symbol of the Bloodgold Dynasty that he ruled as. And as it repaired his amulet it had repaired his magic, enhanced it. Made it even stronger.

But today, was going to be the day that history remembered. He had won in every sensible measure. No army could stand against him, no noble dared. They painted their faces and shaved

their heads and hoped he didn't deign to notice them. But there was always people who would risk everything to be remembered. He didn't hate them. He had done the same thing he thought, although they would disagree. No one loved him, as an emperor he felt he was beyond such things but they felt differently.

So they shuffled in. The ruins of Fantsi, where he had installed the arm. Even now the arm was slowly converting more and more of him. Vidby smiled, the pain was gone but the magic, the terrible magic still remained. He had ten thousand fingers now as he tented his bloody and golden fingers together.

He looked over the rebels, it was a motley collection, adventurers mostly. They were always an awkward fit between what was pragmatic and what fit in his empire. Some had even rose to the nobility, he smiled at them, his reddened cheeks and painted face cracked under his mirth.

"Welcome Adversaries," he said as he stood, picking up his mirror that seemed to be made of black felt instead of mirrored silver. Naturally out of the adventurers there was one who spoke and the rest listened. It was the way of the world.

It was the wizard Amadesis. "We will not allow your rule anymore. Step down now, while you still can fiend." It was simple, Vidby had no doubt Amadesis had practiced it. Vidby strode forward, crooking his mirror in the elbow at this arm. As he strode forward he gestured with the Arm of Tichroma, his arm so that all could see his mastery over the sorcery. "And if I do not?"

They laughed, how could they not. He must look so very silly, a painted face and a golden arm. They though him a jester perhaps. He looked over the crowd he saw barbarian kings, the remnants of the thieves and assassin guilds, a few outlawed mages, priests of temples that he had toppled. He waited for a long moment. These people were already defeated.

His smile broadened when nothing happened. They had nothing after all, He turned around and he felt his consumption magic, then thousand fingers all thinned to a thickness thinner than a hair but stronger than steel, unbreakable. He raised his

arm when they tried to protest his exit and when he dropped it the finger wires sprang to life, wrapped around arm and neck and middle.

At first there was only screaming and then his strange bone like golden hand made its fist and there was the sound of people and armor being pulled apart. Skin stretching, ligaments breaking, bones being pulled out of their sockets, entrails hitting the floor, the hot stench of innards. Vidby turned and paced back to his throne. The screams and ripping sound filled the ruins, and then there were five. The Barbarian King Kami, the Mage Amadesis, the Priestess Naiur, the Assassin Billi and the Mercenary Prince Modoto. He was not looking at them strictly speaking, he was walking away but he could see through his fingers he could sense the vibrations of the floor through his skeleton of Tichroma. He threw the mirror at Amadesis and saw the Mercenary getting caught as the blackness seemed to turn that section of the room into darkest night where things best left unseen prowled and pulled and bit.

The Barbarian struck only moments later. A veritable wall of muscle, wielding an axe that he shouldn't have. Vidby tried to stop it, Fingers manifest through around it but just like his threads from before they simple disappeared around King Kami, The Axe came thundering into Vidby's side, cutting into his spine , He turned around to see Kami's Triumphant face. When the great king pulled out his axe, Vidby did not bleed like those fools that were scattered across the back half of the ruins, ripped and torn apart in pieces.

Vidby bellowed "YOU FOOL" as great gouts of Golden metal spurted out where the blood should be. The Metal was sticky and soon he was as patched up as his ruby. But he was getting faster, he gave up on stopping the Barbarian King and used his fingers on himself instead. Moving faster then anyone could, leaping, flying like some sort of demented top, dribbling gold wherever he goes.

To Kami's credit, he did not stop, not for one instance. That strange axe, no doubt the result of the mage or the priest was al-

ways a threat, always a hair from crumpling Vidby's form. Vidby snarled as he flung himself into the air and dodging perfectly timed assassins blades. The assassin was joining in now. Sure that the Barbarian had lost when Vidby strut, he came thundering down on the priestess, who had been using her magic to hide the rest of them. Priestly magic was weak but when he skittered down from the ceiling like some sort of demented spider, he planted his face into an invisible barrier, invisible even to his magical senses as the mercenary, assassin and barbarian struck all at once. They knifed, shot and axed Vidby as he was pinned into the barrier. Dragging him along the invisible screen like a bug leaving a streak of gold behind him as the weapons thundered into him. "Die now, Traitor, by all that is holy," the priestess solemnly declared as he was driven into the ground. Soon the other two had control over his arms as the barbarian raised his axe to decapitate him. It had not even been a second.

How foolish he'd been. Everywhere you look, there were these people, the little people he thought as he watched the axe begin to descend on his life, the helpers. They would never accomplish much and they were glad to do that little. But they acted like a multiplier, they turned brave men into heroes, heroes into kings, and kings into gods. Vidby barely had time to gurgled "DIE BITCH" as he violently jerked himself to the side, a new arm, golden and skeletal in the same make as his right arm but emerging from his back making it possible. Vidby slammed his fist, his flesh and blood against the earth and you could see her realization that her barrier didn't extend under ground. Hear the fear in her voice as she screamed "AMA—" was the last thing she said before the very ground under her feet rent as if by some giant monstrous force, chemical or supernatural he didn't care. There was nothing left of the priestess except the rain of fine red mist that complicated his golden smear across the barrier before that too disappeared.

The Barbarian and Assassin continued their game but Vidby was winning. The Barbarian was immune to his magic but not the effects of it, the blood of Nair stained him just the same, and

soon every step he made turned into an explosion, his face and body scored and scared by hundreds of ragged gashes, each shallow but beyond number caused by the erupting earth under his feet.

The assassin struggled to remained hidden but he was the next to die, Vidby could see with his fingers and nothing was hidden from him for long. Dagger, Vanish, Dagger, Vanish and then the assassin stayed vanished. If they had found what was left of his corpse, it was lashed with the force of thousands of whips at once until it was imprinted into the stone itself. The mercenary also vanished after firing his strange alchemist cannons at Vidby but Vidby didn't care. It was another sign of his victory, perhaps he would hire him later he thought, as he and the barbarian played their deadly game.

It was soon the mages turn, using the last of King Kami's strength as a distraction. He didn't know where he was but he could feel magic. It was soon evident what was planned. Amade-sis was hoping a spell, that spell, that one perfect perfection of magic, magnified by his very life blood, would be so large, so powerful it would be enough. The air above this duel with the Barbarian King continued until he felt it coming. Vidby felt the spell *ULTIMA* finalize and muttered "Coward". Perhaps for the first moment in his life, Vidby felt at peace. Kami didn't stop his attack and when the entire air and earth was filled with nothing but rumbling and searing hot blue light he was still striking.



## V

### Vidby

When Vidby awoke he was in a crater, it was hundreds of feet deep and covered in scraggly low plant growth and mud. There was no more sign of the ruins of Fantsi, or Kami or Amadesis. The bodies like the ruins had been scrubbed clean by the cleansing fire of Ultima. As Vidby struggled out of the hole he was surprised when a woman helped him out, He didn't know why he didn't use magic but he had simply wanted to feel what was happening. Vidby stood whole, his arm, golden but appearing as a normal arm otherwise. Vidby recognized the woman. He had half thought maybe his wife would come to gloat at him in the afterlife but he wasn't dead and this wasn't his wife.

It was Berelaine, from the wizard's tower. Vidby looked around and saw the wizard himself sat on a make-shift chair, a basket with some green bottles of a dark beer and some bread and grapes were near him. As if the two of them had planned to picnic. "Bravo my boy, surviving that spell is a feat," the wizard said, seemingly happy to see him.

Vidby didn't know what to say, "They called it Ultima," and stopped, touching his body, confirming he had survived. The wizard said, "And you figured correctly, look at you, healthy and whole." Vidby suddenly felt like that kid in the tower from decades ago and was distraught. Anger welled up in him and he walked up to the wizard and planted a single golden finger in his chest, "You did this to me! This is all your fault! Do you know what I've done, WHAT I'VE HAD TO DO!"

There was a sly and just briefly dangerous look from the wizard as he effortlessly redirected the finger away from his chest. "Did I?" he asked and after another long second the wizard asked again, "Did you?" The wizard seemed to not know the answer to

the questions. Vidby looked at the wizard speechless and then turned to Berelaine. She was a beautiful creature, designed to prey on baser instincts than his and she smiled at him, waving in a happy manner from what she thought was a safe distance he supposed.

“I...Am...” Vidby started. The wizard seemed rapt, looking deeply with eyes that betrayed not a thought. “Confused,” Vidby said holding his head. The old wizard nodded, “Happens to the best of us. Come sit and have some bread, I have some good beer here.” And so they sat and talked and ate and drank. They didn’t say much, just enjoyed the day, the weather and the beer. Vidby stood up and asked the wizard, “So what now?” and the wizard stood brushing the crumbs off his robes and said, “Time to study real magic, Vidby.” When they left they left together, as wizards do. Not with magic, but with a flourish and a bow, in between written words and heart and minds. So I say to you, dear reader, thank you for reading. Let me wink and say Goodbye here.

– Vidby the Wizard