

A Taste of Adventure

A Tale of Dunes & Dusk

Dravon Shepherd, last of his family name, stood in the shade of the branches of the withered and gnarled corpse-tree. A dry wind snaked its way above, rattling the bones of the dozen or so remains that hung from the corpse-tree like some macabre ornamentation. *If there were more bodies it'd almost look like a willow.* The rope chafed against his neck. A few more onlookers meandered their way toward the small crowd who had formed a semi-circle around the impending spectacle. Dravon's mouth was dry.

"String him up real good!" came a half-shout from one of the onlookers. Dravon knew the man. He knew all of them, in fact.

"He's done pissed himself!"

Raucous laughter. They'd laugh more when they realized he'd shit himself, too. The executioner finished tightening the knots, jerking Dravon's neck around. When his eyes refocused, they settled on a giant of a man pushing his way through the crowd. *That must be the foreigner I heard them talking about earlier.* The foreigner, having approached the makeshift gallows, gazed intently at the accused.

"What are his crimes?" The voice boomed; deep. Resonant.

"Piss off wastelander."

It was Mattis, the man who wanted Dravon strung up real good. The foreigner turned to regard Mattis, who, upon receiving the attention, shriveled to the back of the crowd. The executioner, clearly off-balance from having to answer questions on top of his duties of tying knots and lynching criminals, fumbled for an answer.

"Thievery," he replied shakily before gaining momentum, "and loitering, cursing. Heresy against Our Empress." The crowd echoed their litany of the Empress. Dravon locked eyes with the foreigner and began to sweat. Wild, animal panic set in. Desperation.

"What is his restitution?" the foreigner asked.

"We don't do that here," the executioner sneered. "Enjoy the show."

"Forty-two silvers!" Dravon shouted, blind to his own sweat. The executioner slugged him, hard, and he saw stars.

"I'll pay sixty, keep the split," the big man intoned. "Cut him down and escort us to the Magister. I want a tablet." The crowd murmured their dissatisfaction. "And which of you," he growled, scanning the group and punctuating each word by locking eyes, "will challenge it?"

Dravon barely caught the rest. The crowd was upset, but the executioner began untying the knots. None too gently, mind you. A sickening smell joined the chorus of blurred senses as he was pushed to walk. *Ah that's right. I shit myself.*

He hadn't known how long he stood, numb and staring at the hazy purple sky above, before the foreigner exited the Magister's hall. The executioner gave him a final shove and left. He rubbed at his neck.

"What's your name?"

"Dravon. Dravon Shepherd."

"Bars. Welcome back to the living, Dravon." The foreigner rummaged through a cart that had been parked nearby, attended by a mule. He pulled out a threadbare cotton tunic and handed it over. "Clean up as best you can and put these on. We need to leave town immediately." Dravon stripped then and there, wiping what he could with his old trousers before putting on the new clothes. Bars nodded. "Best we go now."

He walked behind the big man and his mule for an indeterminable time. The town faded from view, and at last, Bars stopped, satisfied by some unknown criteria.

"We're going south." It had been the first thing Dravon said after leaving Wending. Bars set himself to task making camp. He'd chosen an outcropping to shelter against the wind, and before long, a fire sent tendrils of smoke curling upward. He watched as the foreigner dragged an iron cauldron from the wagon. "I need answers," he ventured. Bars stopped grunting for a moment.

"I have a tablet in the back of the wagon saying you're my property for the cost of sixty silvers." More grunts as the cauldron was hoisted into position above the fire. "I needed a porter, and you needed someone who needed a porter." Dravon watched, fascinated, as the man continued to prepare what looked to be some kind of meal. "My last one, you see, we split ways a while back. I decided to detour to Wending to see about hiring a new one. Thus," he gestured, "here we are."

"A porter?"

Bars paused stirring whatever he'd put into the cauldron and made a face at Dravon. "Aye. A porter. She's heavy, you know." He rapped the cauldron with a spoon that Dravon mistook for a mattock. "We'll have a meal soon. That'll help. In the meantime let me explain. The tablet? It's yours when we hit the next town. I'm no slaver. But until then I expect you'll help." He breathed in the vapors. Dravon smelled it too, now, and his stomach roiled.

"The shakes...I haven't eaten in two or three winds."

"Ah, I'll have the stew ready soon."

The winds blowing from the south-east were hardly noticeable this far northwest, but nonetheless, the temperature cooled slightly. Sleep time would be soon. Bars spooned a clay bowl full of stew and handed it over. Dravon, mind on hunger over manners, slurped it down immediately. *Is it freedom? This stew tastes better than anything I've ever eaten.* He finished his bowl and eyed the cauldron, eyes darting over to the big man settling down on a slab to his left.

"Go ahead, then." Dravon nodded and refilled his bowl. With the stomach pains subsiding he began to see in clarity. His 'employer' had a bald pate and a wiry black beard hanging from a jaw that resembled stone more than flesh. Between bites Dravon could see teeth filed into points, several of which were larger than normal. There was a gray-ish pallor to the man who was now draining his first bowl. A loud belch, and Dravon noticed an expectant stare.

"Well? How is the stew?"

"Good. Uh, well. Damned good, really."

Bars grinned and Dravon grimaced in kind. The two sat in silence save for the clinks and slurps of a stew being enjoyed. An exhaustion descended upon Dravon who went from sitting to a half-lying position. The bigger man noticed.

"Get some rest. We'll talk again at dawnwind."

Dravon awoke much in the same way as he had fallen asleep: the same pinky-purple haze, the same clinks and clangs and sizzle. New scents greeted him, though; tobacco and some herbal aroma. Bars passed him a bowl of the stew from last night along with a clay mug of scalding tea.

"After you break your fast, see about cleaning up and dismantling camp." Dravon simply nodded. Bars reclined with a pipe and his tea. "And when you're done we'll start walking. Many leagues to go, my new friend."

It took Dravon much longer than he'd have liked to haul the equipment back into the wagon. He took a quick visual scan of the over-laden cart. Plenty of water and food; even the mule was eating well with a sack of grain and hay. *He's clearly wealthy. I haven't seen such a stocked traveler since, well, ever. Not that I do much traveling. I suppose that's about to change.* Dravon roused the mule after hitching the beast to the wagon.

"And so our adventure begins!" Bars took a long drag of his pipe, which Dravon noted, appeared to be made of some kind of carved bone or ivory.

"Where are we going?"

"South. All the way until we cross the border into Nhet, and from there south more still until we need to ferry across to Blackspire."

"We're leaving the country? I haven't even heard of Blackspire."

"It's supposedly a wild place. We'll stay on Blackspire Isle for a spell. Until I feel it's time to move on."

"What's at Blackspire? And you said I was a free man once we got to the next town?"

"You're free to go, aye, but if you decide to stay I'll pay a fair wage. Blackspire is a wild place, like I said, and wild places have a lot to offer cooks."

Dravon paused. "Cooks?"

"Indeed. That is what I do, porter! I am the greatest cook in all three empires." He waved as he spoke. "I venture to new places, eating everything I can get my hands on, and return to the City-States with the treasures of my hunts. There isn't a flesh I have set eyes on that I haven't tasted!" A manic glint appeared in the big man's eyes. "And the best ideas I keep in my book. One day, when it is full, I will make copies and sell them to the God-Emperors themselves."

Ah. He's mad.

"I see." Dravon continued walking, catching up to his employer. "With every answer it seems I have two new questions."

"There are reptiles on the isle large enough to eat a man. I intend to surprise them." Dravon must have failed to mask his confusion for the big man barked a laugh and continued on. "The chemists in the City-States pay well enough for rare compounds. The harder it is to come by, the higher the price. So we'll load up on these dragon hides, and claws, and spleens and cart them all the way to Armas."

"The mule carries the wagon, you hunt and cook the beasts. I am beginning to suspect you hired me simply for company." Another laugh.

"Well, that is true I suppose. I need you to learn how to read and write if you haven't already. Fighting is a good skill to have. Mostly, though, you will be selling my goods to the chemists."

"I am no shrewd merchant, Bars."

"I'll teach you what to say and do."

"Then why have me play the part?" Bars stopped and took a swallow of water from a skin.

"I have my reasons."

The pair marched on until the duskwinds whispered their arrival. Bars selected a campsite up a scree-laden hill. As Dravon began to unload the cart he noticed movement, far off on the horizon. North.

"There's folks on the road behind us."

Bars peered down. "See? My investment is already paying dividends. You have sharp eyes, Dravon."

The figures drew closer until he could make out individuals. There were six; men by their gait.

"These men are from Wending. That's Raff the executioner. They're following us." His armpits were suddenly slick. Bars merely squinted.

"Unhitch Daffodil and take her further south. Tie her up somewhere safe." A pause. "The mule, Dravon. Try to break line of sight as you go."

Dravon's heart was beating fast. He quickly led the mule down from their camp and further south, hiding her a half-league away with some grain to keep her quiet. He slinked back to see Bars had a fire ready to light.

"Six on two isn't great odds, porter." The fire took, and smoke bloomed. He handed Dravon a long knife. "Have you ever killed a man?"

"No." *Why did I lie?*

"Hm, well, you likely will before dawnwind. Make peace with your God-Emperor." Dravon spat. "Give me your boots. And your shirt." Bewildered, he complied. The gravel made his feet hurt. "Hide behind that boulder over there. If you get a chance, stick one. They'll do the same to you." Bars tossed the articles of clothing about the tiny campsite and set about hacking a large leg of animal he produced from the cart. After a few moments the campsite was a mess. Bones lay scattered about, and the cook was preparing a meal now.

Truly mad. He's insane.

"They'll approach soon."

Dravon settled into his hiding place, knife handle slippery in his palm. From where he peered between two boulders he could see most of their little camp. Bars began to hum loudly as he tended the cookfire. The smell of meat grew heavy, and Dravon found himself thinking of dinner before the fear gripped him once more. Footsteps approaching.

"Lo! Come sit by the fire, men!" Four appeared up the slope. They were lightly armored and weapons readied. "I see four. Where are your other two?"

"Fuck off, savage. Where's your slave boy?" Dravon couldn't see who spoke, but it was clearly Raff.

"Oh, he's here, don't worry." Bars stood behind the kettle, casually stirring. Silence stretched for what seemed an eternity.

"You jest." A man's voice, unknown.

A third voice, cracking. "Look. His boots."

Dravon saw that file-toothed grin from the cook. Firelight cast the man's face in crimson.

"You're the Butcher, aren't you?" Another unknown voice, but close to Dravon. "The fucking Basalt Butcher!"

The crunch of gravel; behind and to Dravon's left.

"Cut off his head and we might get a bounty," Raff leered as he trudged into view toward the cook. There was a long, nasty looking knife in his right hand.

There was a blur. The giant spoon struck Raff's head with a sound straight from Dravon's childhood. *The sound of melon-gourds when we'd smash them with rocks.* Blood, brain, and teeth sprayed the camp. Raff's body sagged and crumpled under the blow to twitch in the gravel. The others shouted and rushed in.

Dravon turned and coiled, waiting for the quickening of steps, and lunged. Luckily timed, he sank the knife into the torso of the man as he appeared, blade hitting a rib with a violent jolt before reflecting up and deeper in. A sharp exhalation. His momentum carried him bodily into the unknown assailant, driving them both to trip over rocks and sprawl among the scrub and scree. Dravon rolled once, twice, to avoid a retaliatory blow that didn't come.

There was a loud crash, a hiss of steam, and the scream of a man from the camp. He scanned the body for any signs of movement, and seeing none, moved close. Trailing little globs of blood he yanked the long-knife free.

"Son of a whore!" The sixth, following the fifth to circle their campsite, charged Dravon. The thief barely managed to duck a horizontal swing from a banded club and backpedaled. A diagonal chop this time, and Dravon managed to dance around it. It was a hateful, clumsy swing. An opening. He lunged again, knife seeking an exposed armpit, and drove the iron in to its hilt. The man staggered back, enough to raise the club again, and slammed the butt-end into Dravon's face.

A sharp crack. Black.

Something warm, fuzzy, and a little damp nagged at Dravon's hand. From the depths of oblivion he returned, and riding those currents were waves of agony. He moaned and tried opening his eyes. His left eye remained shut, and his right cracked just enough to see the stagnant sky. His face felt twice the size it should have been. His tongue was swollen and dry, and even moaning caused blooms of pain. He willed his right arm to move away from whatever badgered it.

"Cheated death twice now. You're a hard man." He knew the voice but couldn't quite place it. A waterskin was brought to his lips. Bliss. "Don't move now. You took a nasty hit to your face, and I'm no healer. You need to lay still for a while. I'll watch over." Dravon drank more and slipped away again.

In sleep there were nightmares to match those of wakefulness, an endless cycle of in and out. At long last he woke with some semblance of clarity to his thoughts. With great effort he managed a sitting position and opened his good eye, only to immediately regret it. The face of the mule was mere inches from his.

"Daffodil's been worried sick, friend. Been at your side every day now." A sizzle of meat frying. Slow effort and his mouth moved enough for slurred words.

"How long?"

"You've been down for a while, lad. At least three winds."

"What happened?"

The cook grunted. He sat down beside Dravon and handed him a bowl of hot broth. Bars recounted the fight as the porter gingerly sipped.

"Not sure what you remember, but there were six thugs that followed us up. You killed two of them but took a lucky hit."

"Lucky?"

"As it stands your cheekbone is probably fractured, and your nose is a mess, but you've got both eyes and the jaw isn't broken."

"You killed the others? I saw Raff go down." Memories came back now. "You frighten me, Bars." The cook chortled.

"Nothing to fear from me. We're blood brothers now, you and I." Bars handed him a skin of wine. "Take the edge off." They sat for a while. The numbing gift of wine eased the throbbing in his face.

"Where are the bodies?"

Bars grunted.

"Buried out in the middle of nowhere. A fitting end in my book. If you're able to get into the wagon we can pull you for a spell. We'll need to get you to a cutter in the next town." Dravon agreed, and slowly ambled over to the wagon. He shuffled items to make room. Food supplies, glass jars, a woodcutter's axe. Bars cleaned up camp and they set off south again.

"Many leagues to go, try to rest easy," the big man said as he walked along the bouncing cart. He was in good spirits, and gnawed on a large fleshy bone. The wine was making Dravon more than a little dizzy.

"Bars? We have no shovels."

The cook cleaned the rest of the meat off the bone and tossed it aside.

"Aye."