

Sonder

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Sonder

by [OneTrueStudent](#)

Summary

Completed 3/30/2016. Written in parts over a variety of times previously. Follows the events of Ghosts, but there's an intervening story about Narn, that's on a computer that doesn't have internet access. Sander has violence comparable to the Illiad.

At the battle of Couldsoul, Thane Masseron had given Edgar the name Ergog the Destroyer in honor of legends. So it was done. Ergog of old had been a giant, and Ergog of now was somewhere north of seven feet tall. The Destroyer of old had lifted the Boars of Erth and strangled them one by one, letting no limb touch the ground until they were dead. Ergog of now was a journeyman smith, built like they all were, and at Couldsoul had laid his javelins with deadly effect, as the legend of Ergog reported his death-dealing gaze had done in the Halfflight Days. He had been awarded the name as an honor, and Masseron was the thane. There was no debate.

'And yet,' mused Ergog the Destroyer as he chose the leftmost anvil, 'perhaps something could be done.' He preferred the center. It was used less, and the spike was sharper. However when he'd approached it, Thames had been coming in as well, and it was better to have some space.

The Destroyer had tried to revert to merely Ergog, which, albeit peculiar, was close to Edgar. That made no difference. The myth cycle of Ergog the Destroyer was known as that. The legends of Ergog the Destroyer were known to all. Three verses of the first four of the Song of Halfflight were devoted to things destroyed.

'The Destroyer?' he thought, again, while working the crude ingot flat. Reflex hammered into his arms shaped the iron tongue without conscious direction. It was mindless work anyway.

'The Destroyer?' he thought. He was creating something right now.

He realized he'd forgotten what exactly he was creating. There were people watching. He kept smashing, frowning intently. He picked it up and stared at the metal, trying to see through to its original purpose. He hoped someone would ask how that ---- was progressing. It could be anything.

'Which was the point,' he decided and lapsed back into thought. He was creating right now. He wasn't destroying anything. The metal had no form, and he was creating form from nothing.

"What are you doing?" asked Eleanor, the Master's daughter. She was just taller than the anvils and contained infinite questions.

Ergog frowned at her, his huge face grave. "God's will."

"Oh." Eleanor nodded seriously and toddled away. Her little head bounced off towards the door, body chasing after.

'Ha!' thought Ergog. 'Wheel hub!' Of course. It was about the right amount of metal. It needed spoke holes, which is why he'd wanted the better spike. Ergog nodded quickly, very pleased. Thames was still at work, and Thames took his time. He could wait for the center.

"What is God's will?" asked Eleanor. She'd snuck back up on him.

"Wheel hubs," reported Ergog.

"Oh." She nodded.

"Be careful. You don't want sparks in your eyes."

She nodded but didn't move. Ergog waited. She waited. The battle of wills between his patience and her curiosity drew on. He made little shooing motions.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Is the quenching barrel full?"

"I don't know."

"Go check. If it isn't, draw water and fill it. Are you big enough to use the well?" He looked concerned.

"Yes!"

"Good. Go do it. And when you're done, make sure you tell me before coming to the anvil. Do you know why?"

"Because sparks can burn the eyeballs from my skull." She looked up.

Ergog the Destroyer blinked several times. "That would be a concern, yes."

They exchanged grave nods, and the girl toddled off again.

There. Had he destroyed the girl? No. Well, not unless she drowned in the well. She'd be fine. She was six. Four. Maybe eight. She'd be fine.

"Thames!" he yelled over the smithy noises. "Is there anyone in the courtyard?"

"My wife and Masseron's grandmother," Thames replied, pausing his work.

"That's good. Thank you!"

"You reminded me. Cynthia wants you to get married. She wants to introduce you to her sister."

Thames said, looking out at the courtyard.

"Sorry, can't hear you!" Ergog yelled back and began furiously hammering, working the cooling metal while he still could.

Thames laughed at him and turned back to his own work.

In the courtyard Cynthia and Lady Masseron had been speaking predatorily about the giant, but they paused when small Eleanor arrived, lowered the bucket, and drew it. Eleanor was old enough to use the well, but she needed help getting the bucket from the center, beneath the winch, over to the low stone wall. She insisted she could handle it just fine once 'long armed people' helped. She did, sloshing very little from her carrying bucket not much smaller than her. The girl made several trips before they returned to their conversation.

"It's time he got married. He'll be an important person soon, a master smith, and we don't want to lose him to some other hold," Cynthia said, deciding little Eleanor didn't require much supervision. "He'll like my sister. She's pretty."

"Your sister's a shrew."

"She is not!"

"I heard her yelling when I was collecting eggs this morning! She's a harpy. The only thing marrying your sister will do for him is make sure he doesn't need a rooster. Why I heard her shrieking-

Cynthia interrupted her. "The only reason Meridia raised her voice was because Peter talked back to her when she asked him to do the sweeping."

"It doesn't matter why she's yelling. All that matters is she's always yelling." Lady Masseron scowled, and her wrinkled face curled up inside itself.

"She is not always yelling."

"Listen."

Cynthia tried to lapse into indignant silence, but that only allowed a shrill, piercing voice to slice through the mountain air. It cut like razors. Lady Masseron raised one craggy eyebrow.

"You don't even know why she's yelling," Cynthia said to fill the space.

"Doesn't matter. She's always yelling."

"Well, he's past age, and it's time. Thane's Men never marry young, not like Thames and I, but he's not young any more. He hasn't been young in a long time." She deflected the older woman.

"Well, that is true. If he wasn't Thane's Man, he'd already be a master smith, but they're always getting dragged off to war and all," Lady Masseron agreed and rolled her eyes in deep sockets to send a worried glance into the smithy. Cynthia congratulated herself on an artful word. The old lady thought of all the Thane's Men as her grandsons by right, and she mothered them for all the mothers they didn't have.

Eleanor returned, and they went silent. The girl lowered and drew the bucket she couldn't see,

unable to reliably see over the broad well wall. She meticulously coiled the spare rope on a bench so it didn't get dirty, pushing it with her feet. Every pull required her body weight, but she got the bucket up without a problem. Then Cynthia reached out and pushed it to the side, but Eleanor emptied it into her carrying bucket with no help. She trundled back to the smithy yard.

"Why doesn't she use the cistern?" Cynthia asked.

"Whomever asked her to fetch water probably asked for well water. It's warmer, and that might make a difference," Lady Masseron replied.

They were silent until Eleanor was well out of hearing range.

"A messenger came last night," Cynthia said.

"He did," Lady Masseron agreed.

"Do you know what he had to say?" Cynthia probed.

"I do."

That hung between them.

"Is he still around?"

"He isn't."

"You know," mused Cynthia, merely thinking out loud. "I could introduce Ergog to Meridia, but I wouldn't want to do that if he was going to leave soon."

"Introduce them? Why would you need to introduce them? They both live in the hold. They've met," Lady Masseron snapped.

"Oh, of course, of course. But they've never spent any time together. When the Windgate Feast comes up, you could put the two of them together. Ergog and Thames like to sit together, so of course I'll be with my husband. But Meridia won't be able to sit at the White Table any more, so she could sit with us."

"She'll double the wind at that gate," muttered the old lady.

The younger woman took no notice. "And if not, I'll be at Thames' side at the games, and I'll need company."

"That's three months away, so you don't need to worry about bringing down tall prey quite yet."

"And why is that?" asked Cynthia.

Lady Masseron scowled at her.

"Unless you see a problem, I don't think Ergog will mind. Meridia is quite pretty," Cynthia continued.

Lady Masseron's expression frightened dogs at twenty paces. Tiny Eleanor returned, and the three of them went through the ritual without a word spoken. Cynthia continued staring at the old woman, waiting.

"You have an attitude, missy."

Cynthia raised an eyebrow artfully. "I'll need to start preparing soon. Should I not?"

The old lady stayed silent, hoping a faint bitter shrieking would come to her aid. It did not. Instead the mountains whispered with old winds, swirling winds that were gentle or frigid depending on which mouth spoke them. The valleys were sun drenched and hot, and the whitecaps above were austere and silent. Cynthia's solicitous concern did not relent, so Lady Masseron did.

"The Nades have invaded Omland and taken Loghearth. Thane Merian calls for aid. My grandson hasn't decided how he will respond. If he goes, neither Thames nor Ergog will be here for Windgate, so your schemes are unbaked."

"No. He can't go," Cynthia whispered.

"He can, and Merian calls for it. There's no love lost between those two, but the Nades have taken Loghearth." The old one frowned, and her cheeks drooped almost to her chin.

"Why would Thames and Merian have love lost, oh, you mean Masseron," murmured Cynthia unconsciously. "Oh, but they can't go. He can't go now." Suddenly she snapped and whirled to the smithy, dashing away.

'She's fast,' Lady Masseron thought. 'And she's about to learn even faster what it means to marry a Thane's man.'

She was still by the well when Ergog emerged, ducking through the horse doorway, and coming outside with Eleanor in tow. The girl looked confused.

"Come along, Mum," said Ergog, gesturing towards the main hall.

"I can stay where I want," the old lady grumped.

"Aye, but Thames is about to pin your ears back. He hadn't broken the news to Cynthia yet, and he's going to be furious when he finds out you told her."

"Little man, I'd like to see him try," she retorted.

Ergog looked down at her and further down at Eleanor who was attending to the well. He turned back to the old woman with a scowl. "No, Mum, you broke those eggs early. She's never had to watch him leave before. You forgot that didn't you? They've been married since they were kids, but she only came to Masseron's halls last spring. She hasn't done this before."

"Don't teach me eggs, son. I know."

"Ah, Mum, you're harder on the women than on us, and leaving is harder on them than on us too. You remember how it was, I'm sure."

The old lady didn't say anything, but she looked away. Ergog sat down on the well wall and helped the girl pull the bucket up. It looked as big as she was and smaller than a teacup in the giant's hand.

"Come, Mum. We should go. He should have told her already, but he didn't know how. He's been scared of this since they met. You pushed him into a cold stream to get it over, so maybe that's a good thing. But it's hard. Let's give them time."

Lady Masseron didn't say anything as Eleanor emptied the well bucket into her carrying bucket.

Ergog stopped the girl before she could walk back towards the smithy and the quenching barrel. "Let that wait for now. Thames and Cynthia need some time."

"Are you going somewhere?" Eleanor asked him.

"To war, probably," he replied.

"Why?"

"God's will."

"Why did you say God's will was wheel hubs?"

"Different gods."

Eleanor had lots of questions, and Ergog answered the possible ones. Lady Masseron had some questions too. "How could she have avoided learning anyway?"

"Because no one's going to tell her when it would cause that to happen," said Ergog.

"I know that!" Her old voice was indignant.

Ergog nodded. "We found out about it this morning, Masseron hasn't said what he's thinking, one way or another."

"But the messenger left last night," the thane's grandmother replied.

"Yes, but not back to Merian. He went north, to Vyer, and probably on to Moorhens. Possibly Pinetree."

Lady Masseron sank a little, compacting into a small bundle of regret. "Well, he didn't tell me that."

"The announcement is at supper tonight. Not too many people are supposed to know yet, but it'll be everywhere by morning. Well, Mum, I'm going to see the Master's daughter to him. Take care." They were at the side gate of the hall, and the giant awkwardly hugged the small woman. It was hard to give her the respect she deserved, treat her like the relative she wanted, and embrace her when she wasn't much taller than his belt. Then she went alone through the iron bound gate, leaving the giant and the munchkin behind.

The halls of Dwim Caisson were laid on bedrock. The granite floors were always the coldest for they were flattened mountains. Mount Mellin had one stray foot that jutted from the valley floor, part of no ridge and connected to the heights by no kols. Thane Masseron's eighth grandfather had quarried it flat and used the spare to build walls about the city. The inner keep had been built at a later date, but much of it was done in star-speckled basalt. The two stones were noticeably different in temperature, even in the summer, and Lady Masseron took a winding path through the halls, keeping to the grey stone with flecks of silver.

She'd fought tooth and nail for smaller, newer rooms when her husband had died. Back then her grandson was a young thane, and the old woman had bullied him mercilessly. She couldn't do that any more, but at least her quarters were warm. They were dark, true, but warm. Two narrow glass windows looking out on the side of a tower were the coldest parts of the room. At night she hung blankets over them both.

There was a young man in her rooms. She couldn't imagine what he wanted.

"Who are you?" she yelled, scowling at him. Her face was a blunted gargoyle.

"You forget me, Mum? Martin? You said I was your boy, once."

"Martin, Martin, I don't- Oh, Martin! You're the one who always stole my apples!" she yelled again, but now she was smiling.

Martin nodded, and the old lady embraced him like a lost son.

"Of course, I remember you! You're all my boys. But I don't remember that face. There's something growing on it."

"It's my beard."

"It looks dirty. Have you tried washing? Some soap will take that right off."

"No, Mum." Martin rolled his eyes and lifted his chin nobly. It thrust his beard at the old woman.

"Oh, I see. It's just rock moss growing on your face. With your face I understand why you want to hide it," she replied.

"This is why you don't get visitors!" he snorted, but he couldn't fake laughter. He tried, but he cracked and wheezed.

"I get plenty of visitors," Lady Masseron replied, and her expression went from delighted to bland. A shrewdness hid in her eyes. "I had a few just today, but I wasn't expecting more. I certainly wasn't expecting you."

"It's been a few years," Martin admitted.

"It has. Many. How are you?"

"Good."

She measured him carefully against old memories. "How's your elbow?"

"Ah, so you do remember me."

"I told you I did."

"So you did. It's good."

She nodded. Martin had only embraced her with one hand, and the other rested casually in his lap. He wore long, thick sleeves, and his left hand, the one he waved with as he talked, didn't have a glove. The other showed no skin. No one spoke, and the room was quiet. Lady Masseron considered prattling.

"I was wondering if you could get me in to see the Thane," Martin said. "Privately."

"I might be able to. What about?"

"That wouldn't make it private."

"My boy, if you want my help, you had best tell me why. My grandson's very busy." She had too

many wrinkles to look hard, but she did look sharp.

"It's nothing much," Martin said, waving his good hand. "You remember how I dislike talking in front of people."

"It's just the two of us here," Lady Masseron said. "We've got our privacy. Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

"I'd rather tell the Thane."

"And I would be more than happy to help you do that," she replied.

Martin hemmed, equivocating around the issue. Lady Masseron was feeling her years, though, and had a hard time following his attempts to decline. She also started getting a bit deaf, and Martin had to repeat himself more than once. When he grew frustrated, she offered him tea. "It will help you relax, dear. You're a bit hoarse."

She kept a cast iron kettle by the fireplace and a pitcher by the door. One of the Thane's boys filled it every morning. The fire had burned down to embers, and the wood tranche was empty. She put her hand on the door to ask for more.

Martin moved like a snake and blocked her. "No tea, thank you."

She craned her neck at him and narrowed her eyes. "Perhaps I want a little."

"Can you wait?"

"What's going on, boy? I'm getting a bit curious."

"Nothing! I just like my privacy."

"Martin, I'm about to shout for help," she said and moved away from the young man she'd once considered family.

"Mum, please. Don't. I just need to talk to the Thane." He stepped away from the door, but she noticed that he was blocking her in.

"And I'm thinking he shouldn't see you at all, not without a few of his men on hand."

"No! No. Oh Mum, I want his help, not his head. And I've got something to offer in return, but it's a secret, and it's hard to negotiate for secrets with many men around."

"You're playing games, boy. Don't teach me about my eggs."

Martin winced and looked around the room. He wanted something he couldn't see, and finally deliberately moved away from the door. He sat down on a stool with plenty of space for her to leave if she wanted. "There are men hiding in the Long Hair Copse outside. They've been there since at least this morning. I don't know why, but if Thane Masseron was thinking of leaving for any reason, he'd best be aware."

"And how do you know that?"

"I travelled all night, and was going to rest in the copse until the gates opened at dawn. To my surprise, it was full of men, and they weren't in the usual places. They were deep in, among the brambles and the stickers, and they weren't lighting any fires. There aren't a whole lot of good reasons to hide there, not reasons that are good for the Thane."

The old lady was standing by the door, and Martin had put himself a bit away. She didn't doubt he could stop her leaving if he wanted, but not that he could do so quietly. Certainly not without her having a chance to make some noise. "Why did you go in the dark places of the woods?"

"Secrecy," he said with an empty shrug. "A general dislike of being seen. I wasn't in the mood for company."

"And they didn't see you?"

"No, Lady Masseron. They did not. Now please, I told you what I'm about, and you know the full of it. If you're clever, you'll also understand why I don't want this known. Please tell the Thane I'd like to see him, but I need to do it without any other people around."

'The full of it, I doubt,' she thought to herself. 'And I think I'm quite clever, but why he wants such a secret about it I don't see either.' Still she looked at him for a long time.

He was taller than her, but everyone was taller than her. He was much thinner than all the Thane's Men, thinner than he'd been when he was one. His beard made him look like a muskrat. He was quite proud of it. Men were stupid. He'd been shady as a boy, and she had beaten him with a shoe more than once, but she liked him. He'd been good, when he wasn't being terrible. Bah. She was too nice to the Thane's Boys, especially those brought into the family, not just the service.

"I'll speak to him. You can wait here," she decided.

"Thank you, Mum."

"Don't do anything that calls my virtue into question," she grumbled. Men liked off color jokes like that.

Martin didn't laugh. "They won't know I'm here," he promised and sat quietly by the table.

Odd boy. She remembered him laughing more. She let herself out and went looking for her grandson.

Masseron's throne hall was the great hall, the dining hall, the hall that ran the length of the keep. Windows at the crest of the roof pulled smoke out, giving the hall clear air for the price of perpetual drafts. Two great fireplaces with their own chimneys burned weedwood, a fibrous, hard-barked plant that grew everywhere and had to be dug from fields with picks and axes. Its trunk wood didn't have rings like a tree, just a grey-green mass of thick matter that burned sootily, but was always in rich supply. Lady Masseron disliked it. She preferred tree wood which didn't smell so.

Masseron was behind two screens with one of his nephews, Hilton, a man with a knack for numbers. Hilton was a strange one. He enjoyed he doing of sums and had a unique view of trade, wherein avoided loss was more important than gained profit. He and Masseron rarely spoke, yelled a great deal, and within him they'd probably all have starved years ago. Now they were bent over a table of figures, and their fight had just started its slow burn. Voices low, the old lady could hear them starting to build towards what was still a distant explosion. Everyone else had scurried beyond the privacy screens, even Lady Tilde who'd found something important to be done elsewhere. The grandmother watched them, and as their tones began to wind uphill towards the high volcanoes, she interrupted.

"Grandsons, excuse me a moment. Masseron. Hilton. Hilton, why are you getting taller?"

The fight paused. The two men looked at her.

"I'm not getting taller, Mum. You're shrinking," said Hilton.

"I am not, you little goat. You're getting taller. Stop it."

"What can I do for you, grandmum?" asked Masseron.

"I need a word, grandson."

Masseron sighed, and looked at Hilton. They were about the same height, same eyes, Hilton clean shaven and wearing a working smock, Masseron was hirsute and wearing furs. The thane read his cousin's eyes and saw a perfect refusal to back down. A thunderhead waited beyond the pass, and climbing towards it, Masseron saw a hill to put between himself and it. It wouldn't save him from walking through the storm, but it meant he didn't have to look at it.

"Hilton, why don't we pause a moment? Grandmother, what words would you like?"

Hilton had his dander up. His shoulders were hunched, and his eyes flashed. But he looked between his thane and his grandmother, and straightened his spine. "I'll go count over the seed grain. Just to be sure the numbers on the paper are accurate," he said like an intimation.

"Excellent," said Masseron, and they had a stare off. "If you count the same numbers, we'll use those for certain going forward," he allowed.

This was apparently some minor but close fought point, thought the boys' grandmother, because Hilton drew himself taller as he walked off. That left the two of them alone, but not for long. The watchers would come, now that the thunderheads had parted.

"I've got a boy who wants to tell you a secret. He sounds intense. You should come with me and listen to him, but perhaps bring someone with you. A good man with a fast hand," said the old woman.

"With a fast hand," murmured Masseron. "You mean like the smith?"

"If he's around. We need to hurry."

Masseron looked about the screened area of the great hall, where bars of iron weighed down maps and close tables of numbers, a dozen spear-heads lay examined on the table, and a bushel of charcoal rained black dust at every disturbance and sometimes at none. He looked at the numbers he was about to fight with his cousin over. Sighing, the thane stretched his shoulders and bend his knees a few times, squatting to get the blood flowing. "Lead the way, grandmum. We'll see who's around."

Miraculously no one was, or perhaps they'd taken flight before the fight. The hall was empty and the benches cold. Masseron looked at his grandmother.

"When you say fast hands-"

"I'll not tell you your business boy. Bring no one if you think it."

"No, no. I'm not second guessing you." Masseron put his head around a corner and spotted Ve Narn. "Swordsman, fate must have put you here. Come with me."

The tall, red cloaked swordsman looked up and rose. His legs were still newly healed, and he

moved with a gentleness that made him look like he was walking on clouds. Masseron didn't pay attention to his legs, other than to see they worked. Masseron saw the Vision, a black-sheathed sword that hung at his side, a remnant from the highest of highland smiths gone down to the lowland plains, Al Orolk's work, who the Redguard named Swordmaster. Narn carried it as if he'd been born with the blade on his hip.

"As you wish, sire," said Narn.

The fastest, thought Lady Masseron, and she led them to her rooms.

When she led her grandson and his Swordsman to her small chambers, the room seemed to shrink around them. Martin stayed very still by the window, but he hissed with tension. He trembled like a lid on a boiling pot. Masseron had opened the door to look in and frozen in the hallway, blocking the entrance, but Narn somehow slipped around him and inside. The Swordsman took the room like a battlefield and put his back to a wall. Lady Masseron bullied her grandson in, though not without second thoughts.

"Martin," said Masseron carefully.

"My lord," said Martin.

"I heard about you in the southlands. Someone said you killed a woman," said Masseron.

"Without getting into details, you may rest assured she had it coming. There are a dozen men in the Long Hair Copse. They've got spears and bows, and good arrows. If you have any plans to go out that way, they can kill three times their number and put holes in the rest before you know about them." Martin spoke fast, dipping a toe into the water of the earlier murder before diving into the woods.

Narn looked like he cared nothing for what was said, and his eyes told Lady Masseron to stand by the fireplace and Lord Masseron to stand by the door. Martin was on Narn's right, and the Vision hung at Narn's left, and even the old woman saw the clear arc that could trace a path from blade to messenger.

The thane, having delegated such matters to Narn, no longer involved himself in them. He stood where instructed but bent his attention to Martin.

"Now that's an interesting statement," said the thane. "Why all the secrecy?"

"Because those men in that place are only useful if they know you're coming. Otherwise they're just a dozen of men in the woods, and they have nothing in there to eat but what they brought with them. If they know you're coming, then they're an unknown sword hanging over your head. But if they know you're coming, they have to have a spy inside, and if I tell you in public, their spy can tell them, and then they run off before you come looking. Long Hair Copse is a dark, twisted wood, and you'll never find them if they know you're looking. I don't see my secret as being much good if there's no one to find, so I don't aim to rouse the pheasants while the hunters are back in the keep."

No one said a word for a long time before Thane Masseron said, "You leap quickly from ambush to treason."

"My lord, how much do twelve men eat? Who puts warriors in a thicket and leaves them there? Sire, they're not two lads on a hunting trip, or a groom and his brothers before a wedding. A dozen

men, sire. Weapons, bows, and set in deep."

"And what do you want for this secret?" asked the thane. His tone never walked away from caution.

"A little gratitude, sire!" yelled Martin, exploding into shouts as he waved his right arm. His left twitched at the shoulder. "I come to tell you there is an warband ready to pounce on you, I warn you there's a traitor in your midst, and I do it at a risk to my own life due to a issue from some other land, and I do think a bit of gratitude might come my way! Perhaps a warmer welcome than this red ready to draw on me, and a dark room without a fire or even a bit of drink!"

If Martin's words had any effect, it was only in the thane turning his head towards his grandmother without ever looking away. "Make us a bit of tea, grandmum."

She did without a word.

Facing mountains Mellin and Omrigard stared each other down across the valley of Masseron's hall. Omrigard was taller, and Bayle and Crom stood behind him, reaching out with long arms to hold him back from charging across the valley to beat Mellin to death with stone fists. Mellin dared him to try. Mellin was a heaping, isolated peak that cared not at all for his taller brothers. Black-skinned with old granite and wearing the jewelry of silver-speckled basalt, Mellin had a bit of show-off in his clothes, but he couldn't match Omrigard for the latter's long icy beard and tall white cap. The broad valley lay between them like an empty table, and the houses of Masseron's people as well as his great hall Dwim Caisson were diners trying to get a meal in before the locals started fighting.

Dwim Caisson's gates swung wide from the pedestal of the main hall, and the Thane's Men marched from the fore. Leading them was tall, broad shouldered Thames in a leather jerkin, sewed in with steel plates, and a high crested helm. He carried spear and shield, with a honed axe and knife at his belt. From his spear flapped the blue stag, Masseron's pennant.

A step behind him walked the Thane himself, and it was said he'd argued late into the night that he should come before his bannerman. If he had, he had lost. Masseron wore the same leather and steel as Thames, but his jerkin was ruffed in fur, his helmet had a line of kid hide that cushioned the cold metal on his head, and his gloves were soft felt against his skin. He carried an old axe, broken, reforged, and broken and reforged again, that was reinforced with steel bands on the head and haft. His shield bearer walked beside him, but Masseron carried his own shield. The blue stag stood triumphant on the plain, but in clever work the edge was lined with black hawks.

Behind him came two score tall men, fair-skinned and long haired under armor and arms. They stepped quickly. Behind them came three times their number of women and children, who clustered in the gateway. Foremost among them was Lady Tilde. She kept her chin up, but her face was white and her hands shook. Not far from the doorstep Masseron called halt, arrayed his warriors, and stood before them to address them, their families, and their ancestors who stood in the windows, watched from the churchyards, and looked down from heaven.

Three bowshots north the closest reach of Long Hair Copse grew on a craggy hill. It lacked the height of Dwim Caisson, but had twice the features. Two deep defiles plunged from the clear field outside into the hills face, old knife-wounds that bent a head around them. Long Hair grew thick over top in white fir and spruces, as well as poplar. Juniper trees fought for space. The hill had been called Old Man's Head, and the Old Man had taken an axe to the skull when Omrigard and Mellin had first fought in the days of titans.

Several miles back along a line of Mellin' foothills too bent to farm or pasture, Ergog the Destroyer and Ve Narn the lowlander had been creeping back towards the keep since long before dawn. At sunset they'd left Dwim Caisson for the south, circled round, and entered Long Hair Copse where it was called Forest Green, next to Forest Grey of nothing but white fir. It had taken the night and most of the morning to bring them to the Old Man's Shoulders. Thane Masseron began his speech, and Narn and Ergog tried not to pant.

Narn tapped Ergog, and his eyes asked if the giant was ready. Ergog shook his head. Narn nodded, made settling motions, and slithered into the underbrush. He walked like a ghost, stepping so softly that a cloud underfoot would hold his weight, and he wore a dun cloak instead of red. He carried only the Vision. Ergog bore three long javelins and a longer spear, named Rhun after the death-dealing gaze of the Halflight Days, as well as a short, heavy broadsword that would have only his long arms for reach. The Destroyer rested and tried to breathe. Masseron spoke before his door, and the wind brought the sound of words but not their meaning.

Narn returned, nodding seriously. He held up one finger, point up the trees to the south, and then shaded his eyes and pantomimed searching. Ergog lifted a javelin inquiringly. Narn nodded. The giant nodded and followed the Swordsman through the woods.

The mixture of pine and leaf-bearing trees meant the ground was covered in islands of dead leaves that crackled underfoot among rivers of dead pine needles wherein a mountain could stalk silently. They could not go straight, but wound side to side to stick to cover. Narn looked down and Ergog looked up, and they were almost to the Old Man's Head when Ergog caught the swordsman by the shoulder and halted him.

Ergog pointed to a tree and indicated a guard Narn had not seen. The duo stood almost under him, but the guard was looking south, watching Masseron make his speech. Narn looked at the ground beneath the tree and saw it was soft needles.

In the instant before the killing, they exchanged glances. They didn't ask questions, but they did recognize the silent burden of combined murder they were about to lift. It was murder for all the best reasons, and the lowlander, who was tall for one of them, and the giant, who had been born in the image of mountains, looked at each other like men with souls before they became engines.

Ergog's javelin smashed the guard from the tree, and he fell, trying to scream as his lungs no longer held air. He hit in a pile and cried like a deer, and Narn silenced him with the Vision.

They ran south. The next guard had heard something but didn't know what. He never found out. The bloody javelin sailed from a cover of spruce and took his throat. The man fell, broke himself and the throwing spear, and Narn finished him on the ground.

Those were the only guards and ten men beneath a ridge, looking down at the long road. This ridge was overgrown close to the road to Vyer. There was a broad killing ground between them, and the hill was staggered with boulders and crags. It would be a deadly assault from the front. Narn and Ergog came to the rear, and saw ten backs laid out before them. The ambushers trusted their guards.

They rushed, and Narn killed two before the first scream. Rhun unbound the leader's bowels and splattered the ground with his innards and hips. The first to understand what was happening leaped up before his mates, and met Narn alone. The Vision caught him from shoulder to hip, and laid his insides open for inspection. Ergog destroyed another. Then the rest were on their feet and charged, and died screaming in the woods.

Thane Masseron was still talking when the shrieks burst out of the trees. He cried to his men to

form up and get ready. The children began to yell. The wives and mothers yelled to bring the children inside, and Masseron's troops broke ranks to shove their families through the door, and Cynthia waded through them to throw herself at Thames. Lady Tilde stared at her husband, and her eyes were bleak as Omrigard's head. She began shoving families inside. Masseron had to ignore her, and kept pushing his men to readiness, facing the Long Hair Copse. He realized the only cries were his own, his men, the families of his hearth and home. The Old Man had gone silent.

Narn walked out of the trees, took off his brown cape, and swapped it for a red cloak in plain view of the hall. The cries and shouts choked off slowly and died. Once the Swordsman was properly accoutered, he walked back to Masseron in a straight line.

"Problem's done," he reported. He lowered his voice. "Ergog's a bit horrifying, so he'd rather stay hidden until he can wash up. They were there, in the numbers claimed. The traitor was right."

Hissing back, Masseron replied, "Traitor?"

"They had guards, sire. They were not just in the low places. They were in the low places with guards. Martin counted them. He was among them, sire. To attack a lord in his own land from ambush is treason, and Martin betrayed the traitors to tell you of it. That one carries a two sided knife."

"Perhaps," thought Masseron, and went back to forming up the warriors. By the time they got to the Long Hair Copse, Ergog was pink skinned and clean, with Ruhn and three broken javelins.

That night Masseron feasted in his halls. Both firepits roared huge and the air was cold. A fatted calf roasted on each, and when his men ate, they tasted ash. The new-broached beer was flat and stale. Narn sat in the seat of highest honor, at Masseron's right hand, and he said little, drank less, and toasted quietly. Ergog the Destroyer plead a minor sickness, and spent the night in the smithy. The girl, Eleanor, stayed with him, asking all sorts of impossible questions.

"Eat well and sleep deep," Masseron told his men, when there were no jokes and the drunks were quiet. "We still leave in the morning."

And Martin sat at Masseron's left hand, in a seat Lady Tilde surrendered. He was toasted three times and welcomed into the hall. His bonds of service were lifted, and the Thane welcomed him to stay, so long as he liked, and shelter under Masseron's name. They all toasted him grimly.

On top of Omrigard where the shadows of the moon lay among the bright ice, and the starlight danced with the motions of their distant gods, a man in a black horse waited on a part of the glacier where there was no path. The mountain goats did not climb this high. His name was Fury, and he wore a black cape over ebony armor. His mare was the color of the void. Hanging from his saddle was the hammer named Rage, hooked and spined with claws and teeth. Fury watched Dwim Caisson and saw the lights of the party shimmer on the grass before the tall windows. Inside Martin was being greeted as was his due, and Fury waited.

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