

Glances and Blows

Saranthos walked into the murky room and looked around carefully. There were no distinguishing features to this room, not including a vague stench of age, and it was uninhabited save for a lone figure sitting in the shadows to his left. Saranthos pulled up a chair and sat down opposite the shadowy figure.

“I don’t normally accept job offers for what I do,” Saranthos said quietly, “but your offer intrigued me. I’m still hesitant to steal something that I will never see the full profit for, however, so you’d better make this convincing.”

The profile gave the barest hint of a nod, then spoke in a slow, rumbling voice. “I’ll not waste time then,” the obviously masculine figure stated, “What I want you to steal is something held very dear to the lord in question, one Tomas Evangarde. It is a small diamond, of significant value, but worth more as a slap in the face of the nobility. This is what I wish you to retrieve. Lord Evangarde is holding a banquet very soon, and that will be the perfect opportunity to steal the diamond. I will provide you with a noble identity, and you will infiltrate Lord Evangarde’s estate and acquire the diamond by any means necessary.”

Saranthos nodded carefully, thinking. “You want me to steal from the house of a high lord. That means that I want 50 percent of your profits, at least.”

“There will be no profit from this venture,” the figure said calmly

A surprised look flashed over Saranthos’ face. “Surely you realize,” he said, “that I still need some money to make this venture worthwhile for me. If you get your kicks from pissing off the gentry, that’s all well and good, but I’m in it for the money.”

The figure made an amused noise and placed two pouches on the table. “This will suffice, I trust?” he asked.

Saranthos grabbed one of the bags and looked inside. There looked to be about five hundred royals in the bag, no paltry sum, especially if the other bag held a similar amount. He glanced up at his mysterious benefactor. “You sure you’re up for this?” he asked, “This is a lot of money just to humiliate a noble. If he insulted your honour, you could just challenge him to a duel and be done with it, you know.”

The figure chuckled and shifted as he put his leg onto the table and into the light. It made a curious noise as it hit the wooden table, and on closer inspection, Saranthos discovered it to be a facsimile

of a leg, remarkably crafted, but made of wood. “You are my final avenue for revenge young man,” he said softly, “I pray you are as good as you say.”

Saranthos leaned back in his seat. “So when is this party?”

“Father, my decision is final,” Cath said calmly, “I’m leaving for the army in one week. I’m tired of dithering around, not doing anything. I want to make a real difference in the world.”

His father’s normally impassive face flashed with rage. “And you think that being in the army will let you do that? Cathrias, everything we have, everything I have worked so hard to achieve for our family, was built upon manipulation of the army! The nobility manipulate the army; you’ve seen me negotiate with other gentry enough to know that. I do not want to see you become a pawn - much less a pawn in some other lord’s pocket - should our fortunes change.”

Cath met his father’s rage evenly. He had expected this. He’d known it was coming and he was prepared for the consequences. “That may be so, father,” he said, “but the army is still the place where things get done, manipulated by the nobles or not. Disavow me if it will ease your mind, but I *am* going to join the army, whether you like it or not.”

For a moment, it seemed that Cath’s father would explode into a tirade against his son, but he calmed himself, then spoke in a curiously dead tone. “As you wish, my son,” he said quietly, “I will not disavow you – I could never do that to one of my kin – but I would give you one last grand banquet, that you might not forget so soon the life you leave behind. I will not stop you if you should choose to go before then, though.”

Cath stared at his father curiously. He hadn’t expected this to go as easily as it had, and he was a bit suspicious. “As long as you hold your party before the week is out, I will attend, since that is your wish.”

His father nodded, and then waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. Cath took his leave and began walking across the palatial grounds of his family estate towards his quarters. As soon as he had been allowed to choose where he slept, he had moved his bedroom over near the garrison of guards that protected the estate. Over time, his exposure to the lives of these soldiers had changed how he chose to live as well. His quarters were spartan at best, inhabited only by a soldier’s cot and a writing desk, installed at the behest of his father, with a small window near the ceiling the only source of natural light.

Still, it was his home, and made that way at his own request, so that he could be prepared when he finally joined the army.

As he reached the door to his quarters, however, the entrance was blocked by a man standing in the doorway. He was tall, at least six feet in height, and had a very wide build. He was immediately recognisable as a member of the estate garrison by his studded leather armor, but Cath knew him more as a friend than a guard.

“Ten!” he called out, raising an arm in greeting. Ten did the same, then leaned in close to Cath.

“So how did it go?” he muttered looking around as if he expected someone to reprimand him for talking to Cath.

Cath grinned, “It went better than I could have expected, to be honest. He resisted at first, and I thought he was going to go into a full blown rage, but then he calmed down and just sort of accepted it. I have to attend a party that he’s going to hold for me, but other than that, it would seem I’m getting off scot free.”

Ten grinned as well and clapped Cath on the back. “That’s great, Cath! I’m due for redeployment back to the army any time now, so we may end up working together. Ah, that’d be a change - me commanding you, rather than the other way ‘round. The army is one of those few great levelers in life, and more nobles should join. It’d be one hell of a reality check, that’s for sure. But I don’t need to talk about this with you! You’ve already decided to join up! Come on, let’s go have a drink – I’m off duty.”

Cath smiled and nodded, and then walked off with Ten, who had started off on some wild story about his days before the army, some forty thieves nonsense or other. Cath half-listened and returned to his own thoughts. Aside from Ten and a few others, none of the garrisoned soldiers had fully accepted Cath as one of them. They made a good show of it, all camaraderie and equality, but there wasn’t that other aspect of true friendship – the inane jokes, the calm acceptance of his presence – plus they always seemed to treat him with a certain amount of deference. The only exception to this deference was Ten, who seemed to have an almost gleeful abandonment of the rules of courtesy, even in front of Cath’s father. He must be a very efficient soldier, else Lord Evangarde would have dismissed him straight away. He wasn’t the type of man to tolerate cheek.

Cath pulled himself out of his own thoughts and returned his attention to Ten, who seemed to be finishing up his story. “Those were some good times,” he sighed longingly, “I had some good friends in

the city – unsavory folks, all of them. Not the kind of people you’d want to meet in a dark alley, but they were friends, and good ones at that. Now, let’s get that drink.”

Saranthos checked himself one final time. Though he was prone to wearing suits for his everyday business, he had never worn one so finely tailored as this. He had also had his hair trimmed and combed back in the current style and carried a walking stick, though he lacked any need to use it. All in all, he looked like a proper gentleman, and that was exactly the point. He was in a carriage en route to Lord Evangarde’s estate and he needed to look his best and fit in. The carriage itself was rather like he was – a facade, good to look at on the outside, but markedly less reputable on the inside. Still, it would serve its purpose and get him where he was going.

As he neared the estate, Saranthos peered out the window of the carriage and got his first good look at where he would be spending the rest of the day. The first thing that struck him was the size of the place. On their own, the walls encompassed what would have been an entire city block, but this area was largely made up of gardens, or so he’d been told. Still, it was a very large area for one family to live in. The second thing that struck him was the air of detachment. He knew that the whole reason the nobility lived out in the country was so that they could project an air of disinterest on the affairs of the city, but this manor seemed to embody the concept. The affairs of the city seemed silly compared to what would go on here. The entire grounds screamed this concept, and Saranthos could not help but be impressed by it.

His time for inspection quickly ran out as he approached the house, though to call it a house would do it an injustice. It was a palatial affair, vast and sprawling, where one could likely lose themselves if they didn’t know exactly where they were going. It too had facades, but these were subtle and accented the manors richness, rather than making it seem gaudy. It was a beautiful piece of architecture, and almost too much for one man to live in. Almost.

Saranthos stepped out of the carriage and walked up to the stately front doors, where he was ushered inside by a doorman and led to the grand hall. As soon as he stepped inside, he noticed two distinct groups chatting around the tables. One was filled with high nobility, or so he assumed by their effortless air of superiority, and the other was filled the lesser nobles, distinguished by their attempt at the same. Saranthos quickly fell in with the latter of the groups and began making small talk with a group of gentry. He continued in this manner until the high nobles began to take their seats for lunch, at which the lesser nobles scrambled to do the same. As he settled in however, he noticed his mark, Lord Evangarde,

standing to make a speech. He immediately quieted and turned his attention to the front of the hall, as did the other assembled lords.

“Thank you all for attending this banquet today,” Lord Evangarde said, his sonorous voice capturing the attention of any who might not have been listening fully, “This is, as you all know, a send off for my dear son Cathrias, who is leaving shortly to join the army. I have nothing but the deepest respect for his decision, and so, as a means of advocating my goodwill – as well as providing entertainment for all of you – I will also be hosting this very day a tournament. It will be a test of skill at arms, dueling to be precise, with the prize being a diamond from my own collection. Anyone is free to ensign themselves, whether it be a member of my guard, or one of you assembled in front of me. And with that, I believe it is time to begin our meal!”

Cath sat back in his seat, surprised. A tournament? That would explain his father's calm acceptance of his ultimatum. His honour and his desire to show his father that he knew what he was doing would mean that he would have to enter the tournament. His father knew this and would use the tournament to either make an example of his son or show off the ability of his progeny. Either way, he won – his father was a very careful planner.

Despite this, Cath was excited. He would get to test himself before he joined the army, and give his father a metaphorical what-for. He also felt morally obliged to take part, since his father had offered up some of his own riches as a prize. If he won the tournament, he would win the diamond and return it to his father. All this didn't lessen the sheer excitement he felt at finally being able to show his skills. This was going to be a very interesting party, it seemed.

Saranthos silently gnashed his teeth. This was unexpected. The diamond being offered up as the prize for this tournament was the one he was after, there was no doubt about it, and to compound things, Lord Evangarde had apparently felt compelled to show everyone his earnestness in offering up a prize, placing the diamond in a display case at the front of the hall. Stealing it was definitely out of the question now, but it was a prize, after all. Maybe he could win it. Or what if -

“Sar! Is that you?” Saranthos jumped in his seat, but quickly regained his composure. He was not going by his own name here, and if anyone saw him react unduly to this strange name, he might arouse suspicion. He looked around covertly, and was surprised to see a familiar face. What was Tiennen doing

here? No matter, he had things to discuss with him, things that couldn't wait. He made sure he had Tiennen's attention, then pointed discretely at a nearby balcony. Tiennen nodded, then hastened to the appointed spot. Saranthos quickly excused himself from his table and went to the balcony.

“Tiennen!” Saranthos nearly shouted, keeping his voice down for the sake of privacy, “What are you doing here? This is most unexpected.”

Tiennen grinned at Saranthos before responding. “Should've known it was you, mate. You're the only one that still calls me Tiennen when I prefer to go by Ten. In any event, I work here. Something tells me you don't have the same excuse.”

Saranthos smiled, despite himself. “You still call me Sar, when I prefer to go by Saranthos. And I *am* working here, though I wasn't hired by Lord Evangarde. Can I trust you to stay out of my business while I'm here?”

Ten chuckled slightly, “So long as you don't harm anyone, I don't have any problem with you. I'm here to guard Lord Evangarde, not some of his precious stuff. What're you after, anyway?” Saranthos nodded to the diamond and Ten nearly choked. “Evangarde's diamond?” he asked skeptically, “You still do set your hopes high, don't you? Well, good luck in taking that bit of treasure, though if I were you, I'd just head home. The only way you're getting that jewel is if -” he narrowed his eyes at Saranthos, “You're planning on entering that tourney, aren't you?”

Saranthos smiled knowingly and nodded. “It's the only way I can think of to get it on such short notice. You reached the conclusion almost as quickly as me. I trust that doesn't fall under your 'Don't hurt anyone' jurisdiction?”

“You're daft, you are,” Ten said quietly, “No, I won't stop you from getting yourself killed fighting a bunch of nobles, fat lot of good it'll do you.”

Saranthos feigned surprise, “You wound me with your accusations of ineptitude, sir! I think that these dandies will find that I know a lot more than I should about swordplay.”

Ten waved a hand dismissively. “I know better than to try and stop you when you have your mind set on something. Just try to be careful. Most of these nobles know what they're doing.”

Saranthos nodded and returned to the party, starting up a small conversation with one of the nobles next to him. His heart wasn't in it, however and he nearly fled the table once a registrar opened up registration for the tournament. He was quickly signed up and all that was left was to wait.

The hour of the tournament had finally arrived and Saranthos was nervous – not overly so, but it was there. One of the many gardens on the estate had been repurposed as a dueling ground, and the assembled nobility were now at this dueling ground waiting for the tournament to begin. The first round was between Saranthos and some other lordling he didn't know, some Lord Torquemae. He was a bull of a man, muscular and tall, and he looked to Saranthos to be quite dull conversation. Saranthos had been given his choice of weapon, a thin rapier, and he assumed Lord Torquemae had been given the same, since he carried a two handed sword at least three quarters his height. Still, Saranthos wasn't incredibly worried, since a sword of that sort generally indicated a wielder with more muscles than brains.

He and his opponent both took to the field, and, at a sign from a referee, they went at each other. Torquemae made the first sally with a powerful but clumsy swing that, despite the weapon's blunted edge, would have put him out of commission for a long time. Fortunately, he saw the attack coming from a long way off and dodged the swing easily, responding with his own swing that, while lacking power, rapped him smartly on the head. A few more exchanges like this left Torquemae reeling and Saranthos hardly even out of breath. In a few more moments, Torquemae was unconscious and Saranthos was no more the worse for wear. He knew, however, that the bouts would only get tougher from this point, and so made his exit quickly to prepare for the next match.

Cath looked on with interest. The first round of the tournament had been intriguing, to say the least, with technique beating force quite handily. Cath took special interest because the lord who had won was using his own preferred weapon, a rapier. Still, this was no time to get distracted, his first round was coming up, and he had to be prepared for whatever he would face.

Cath was surprised, however, to see a young member of his father's own guard facing off against him. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised, really, since his father had opened this tournament to all who wanted to join, but it was still unexpected. He readied his blade and, at the signal, went forward.

The battle was over almost in less time that it had to begin. Cath stepped forward and, with two well placed blows to either side of the young guardsman's head, quickly knocked him to the ground. He obviously had not had much of a constitution, for this alone seemed to have knocked him unconscious. Cath, recognising his victory, nodded quickly to the audience and took his leave. Already preparing for his next bout.

The rest of the tournament seemed to pass quickly for Saranthos, and while he had a few difficult bouts, there was nothing he couldn't handle. Soon, he was surprised to find himself in the final round, against Lord Evangarde's son, of all people. He readied himself carefully, despite his belief that some dandy's son wouldn't prove too much of a challenge, pampered as they all were. He entered the field and squared off with his opponent.

As soon as the signal was given, Saranthos discovered how wrong he had been. He could immediately tell that he was outclassed by this noble's son, and only his quick reflexes prevented him from taking a hit on the first exchange. He gasped in frustration. He was so close to getting what he'd been paid to retrieve, and no noble lordling was going to prevent him from doing his job, no matter how skilled. He pressed the attack, knowing his technique would have to be impeccable if he was to win this.

Cath jumped in surprise as his assailant suddenly lunged forward for an attack. The entire tournament, his opponent had been defensive, waiting for his opponent to make a move before placing an attack. This, however, was completely different from what he had expected of him, and it caught Cath off guard for a moment. Cath recovered quickly, but his lapse was enough that his opponent landed a smart blow against his ribs. Not anywhere particularly painful or lasting, but it was enough that Cath knew he had to step up his performance to beat this foe.

As his opponent retreated, Cath pressed the attack. His foe's technique was good, but not flawless, and Cath managed to land a blow against his arm before backing out of range once again. Both now circled each other warily, waiting for the other to make an error.

Cath's opportunity came first. His opponent made a slight misstep and Cath lunged forward, bringing his rapier up in a savage upward slash. His assailant, however, stepped into the blow rather than out of it and brought his blade down in a curious slashing motion that, while not quite a parry, functioned in a similar manner while still directing a blow at Cath's shoulder. Cath was surprised, and took the hit before backing off. He'd have to watch for that in the future.

Saranthos cursed quietly under his breath. He knew that his step-in would only work once, and it bothered him that he'd been forced to use it so early. He had to end this now. He stepped forward and began a flurry of attacks, each one on a different side and from a different angle than the last. His

opponent blocked every one until, at last, he thought he saw an opportunity in a slightly off position in his opponent's blade. He stepped forward and made a savage upward thrust.

He knew the technique as soon as he saw his opponent step forward instead of backward. His own step-in. *How did he learn it so fast*, Saranthos wondered vaguely as he felt the blade leave his hand. He and his opponent regarded each other for a moment, before Saranthos knelt before his opponent. "I yield," he said for all to hear.

Cath beamed as his foe knelt before him. He had done it! He had won! One of his father's retainers rushed out onto the field to congratulate him and give him his prize. He accepted it with a shaken hand, then walked over and returned the diamond to his father. He approached his opponent, still kneeling on the ground and offered him his hand. His former assailant smiled gratefully and accepted the hand, letting Cath pull him to his feet. He nodded over toward Cath's father, and Cath realised with a start that he still had to accept his "patron's" acknowledgement of victory. He and his opponent walked over to Lord Evangarde and knelt before him. Cath's father smiled bemusedly and beckoned for them both to rise.

"That," he said loudly, "was one of the best exhibits of swordplay I've seen in a long while. I already know my son's name, but I would know that of his opponent." He looked at the other lord expectantly.

Saranthos glanced over at the other lesser nobles. They had self-satisfied smirks on their faces, since they already "knew" who he was. *Well*, Saranthos thought wryly, *lets give them something to think about*. "My name is Saranthos Inesius," he said proudly, and the look of surprise on the faces of the lesser nobility was priceless, "pleased to provide you with entertainment, my lord."

A few more meaningless pleasantries were exchanged between Saranthos and Cathrias, and then they were dismissed with the rest of the gentry, the day over. Sar walked toward his waiting carriage and smiled. There was a weight against the inside of his pocket, small, but noticeable, and he knew it was the weight of the small diamond. He had managed to take it from Lord Evangarde, even as he was so smug in his complete victory, and that was no small feat. He would return to his client richer, but not only in money. The nobility knew him now, and that would provide a whole new level of notoriety, for good or for ill, but he was ready for it. All that awaited now was the return to the city.