

"A Game of Sevens"  
A Four Kingdoms Short Story  
Brandon Draga

**“A Game of Sevens”**

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The ropes cast off the side of Bremmer's Glory caught the dockside bollards easily, ensuring the ship was able to securely dock in East Fellowdale's main port. Erasmus Stonehand had not said more than he needed to the captain or her crew during their voyage across the Windswept Sea, and they had been good enough not to pry, more than content to simply have the bard perform for them every night. The irony was not lost on Erasmus, who knew that had the crew been as nosy as some he had traveled with, his performances would have ended their questions all the same. He smirked at the thought, reaching for his coin purse and walking toward the ship's captain, a half-orcish woman of probably forty years, her taupe skin as indicative of her Majad descent as her thick accent and clear propensity for smaller male crew members.

"You sure you won't be staying on with us?" she asked. "That may have been the easiest two weeks at sea I ever sailed, thanks to that mandolin."

"Quite sure." the half-elf smiled, pulling two silver Majad crescents from his purse and handing them to her. The captain had remarked off-handedly early in their trip that payment for passage wouldn't be necessary in lieu of entertainment, but she did not hesitate to take the coins, meaning either that her words had been the result of drink, or that she had been considering a much more private form of entertainment. Whichever was the case, Erasmus felt inclined to pay his way honestly; it was always advantageous to keep friendly with those who could move one quickly and quietly.

"Suit yourself." the captain nodded evenly, weighing the coins. "I'll be in port for the next two days, then we sail the coast down toward the Otharines before heading back to Majadrin. If you just so happen to be heading that way, come back to port to see me." She leaned in close, her large, underbitten canines showing as she grinned and winked lasciviously, adding "My offer from back in Ivyd is a standing one."

Erasmus shone as convincingly earnest a smile as he could muster, hoping the captain didn't notice how hard he was trying to stifle a laugh. "My calling is inland for the time, but I am sure our paths will cross again, and when that time comes I may end up taking you up on that offer."

The captain took a half step back, allowing Erasmus a clear path to the gangplank. "I look forward to it," she said, the smirk ever-present. "Until we meet again, bard," she placed one fist over another and bowed her head "may Bremmer see you to safety."

"And you, Captain." Erasmus replied returning the gesture, a Majad sign of mutual respect, before turning to the gangplank and walking down toward solid land for the first time in two weeks. As he reached the crowded streets of East Fellowdale, he mused about the likelihood of his *actually* needing to take the captain up on her offer, and the amount of drink that would be required. She had been stunning by half-orc standards, which was to say she was a bit homely by most humans' standards. She certainly was worlds better than that woman Zarah had targeted for that hunnypot heist they had pulled off. That memory churned his mind and his stomach all at once, as much as the thought of the woman as that of Zarah. He felt like he would tumble over at any second.

In an instant, he shook his head, pushing the memories of his time in Majadrin as far away as possible, and convinced himself that his momentary bout of nausea was the result of having his feet on dry land after so long a trip at sea. He looked back over his shoulder at Bremmer's Glory and saw her captain back about her duties, and shrugged nonchalantly. He had certainly done much worse, and having a friend in a ship's captain was advantageous after all.

The rain came in hard and fast from the west, much more so than Erasmus had anticipated. He slung his pack across his front, pulling his cloak tight across it. He kept his eyes cast upward, trying through the downpour to navigate the streets that had ceased to be familiar to

him three years ago without colliding with anyone. In that sense the rain proved a blessing, helping to clear the streets of much of their earlier congestion, though only having a name and vague description of a sign to follow Erasmus was unsure of just how much the blessing was worth if he wound up walking into the Sailor and Seahag soaked to the bone. Thinking of the possibility of the same deluge affecting the mandolin sitting beneath his cloak, the bard quickened his pace substantially. Much to his relief, just as he began to feel the moisture begin to seep through the fabric of the cloak, he spotted a worn sign hanging over a dark green door, its faded paint depicting a burly human arm wrestling a scaly blue-green woman.

He ducked inside hastily, the fishy smell of a port in the rain replaced instantly by that of warm bread, stale beer, and wood burning in a hearth. Six steps led down into the taproom from whence the smells were wafting, allowing Erasmus an ideal vantage point for a cursory glance. The hearth was built directly under the the stairs that led up into the inn's overnight rooms, across from the taproom entrance and in the opposite corner to the bar, which looked to be a plain oak covered in a marbled lacquer that sat like second-hand fineries on a road-worn farmer. The years of trade since the orc invasions seemed only to have widened the city's multicultural population, indicative of people of nearly every feasible height, weight, race, colour, and stock crowding the taproom in an affable bustle, and to look at things it seemed as though Erasmus was the only one in the tavern who *hadn't* been anticipating the rainfall. Most looked as though they had been there for several hours already, empty plates and flagons cluttering the corners of several tables as only a handful of barmaids and maitres scrambled to keep up.

The one thing Erasmus seemed *not* to be able to find, much to his chagrin, was the red-haired halfling at the bar who was supposed to be his contact.

The bard cursed inwardly. Much as he was looking for a reason, *any* reason to get out of Majadrin, the promise of work here in Ghest was the only thing that kept

him from turning down the number of seafaring jobs he had been offered when he had been trying to find passage in the first place. He had never thought of himself as a pirate, but there were a lot of things that Erasmus had never thought himself before someone paid him to be them.

With a resigned sigh and the sound of the rain hammering the door behind him, Erasmus pulled back the hood on his cloak, unclasping the now soaking thing as he descended the stairs, and hanging it on a hook near the bottom of them. If he was going to find any pirate captains looking for crew, it wouldn't be in the middle of a storm. He reasoned that perhaps he could perform tonight in exchange for a warm bed and some food and drink that wasn't salted, and maybe a few coins extra; in a crowd this large at least a few patrons may be generous enough to offer some gratuities, and if not Erasmus was sure that at least a few were malleable enough to be persuaded as such.

He was ten paces from the bar when a table nearby caught his eye, and the sound of coins being piled on a tabletop caused his ears to perk up. Six people sat at the table, two dwarves, two human women, a mustachioed half-orc man, and a halfling who barely looked old enough to enter the tavern. All held a hand of worn playing cards, and all were presently placing bets. The sight caused the half-elf to make a sharp left and walk directly toward the game. The more coin he could make tonight, the better.

"Excuse me, everyone," he said, addressing in particular the shorter, round-faced human woman who appeared to be dealing the present hand "Is there space at this table for one more?" He tugged one corner of his mouth up in a lopsided smirk and winked at the woman. "Been at sea for a while, and I could use some pleasant company." The woman's blush was barely perceptible on her dark skin and in the low light, but her shy smile back meant either she had a penchant for soaking-wet half-bloods who hadn't bathed in days or that she didn't think he knew she was a whore trying to size up how poorly he

managed his coin. In truth, he was banking on the latter.

"Pull up a seat, friend!" the halfling slurred cheerily, sliding off his own stool and somewhat tipsily readjusting it to make space. "I don't take up too much room." Erasmus noticed the empty flagon where the halfling had been sitting wondered if the little man actually *was* old enough to be in here.

"Thank you." he replied, looking back to the dealer for another wink. "I don't mind if I do." He turned back to see the halfling trying in vain to clamber back up onto his own stool. "Would... um... do you need a hand?" he asked, not sure whether or not it was offensive to do so.

The halfling eyed the stool for a moment, hands on his hips, then looked back to Erasmus. "Would you mind? I swear to Sheandr  I shrink when I drink!" He laughed before not-so-subtly elbowing Erasmus in the hip and adding with a hoarse whisper "Well, not all of me."

"I'm sure that's the case." Erasmus replied as he hoisted the halfling back onto his stool, sure that he was too drunk to recognize the evident sarcasm in his voice. He pulled up a seat for himself between the halfling and the half-orc, his smirk and gaze returning to the giggling dealer. "So," he asked "what's the game then?"

"Sevens." the second human woman, pale-skinned with golden, short-cropped hair, replied matter-of-factly, her eyes remaining on the cards in her hand.

"Sevens?" Erasmus raised an eyebrow quizzically as he was dealt three cards by the round-faced woman. "I'm not sure I'm familiar with the game." he lied. "Is it new, or have I just been on the other side of the sea for too long?"

"Don't you worry." the male dwarf that sat on the opposite side of the halfling chuckled. "Let's all just play a few hands. Best way to learn is through doing, ain't it?"

"I couldn't agree more." Erasmus grinned back, hoping the dwarf wasn't calling his bluff. He lifted the cards up, carefully peering at them; an ace, a deuce, and a four, all suited. A perfect seven on his first hand. He bit back a curse at his good luck as the players took their

turns placing bets and choosing whether or not to swap out cards. Always maintaining his smile, when it came time for Erasmus' turn, he feigned a moment of thoughtfulness before reaching into his purse and dropping three Majad copper stars on the table, plucking the ace and four from his hand, and sliding them face-down to the dealer. "I suppose I'll take two new ones." he shrugged as convincingly as possible. Two copper was a small price in the long run, he had to remind himself as the dealer handed him what turned out to be a pair of fives. When the cards were all revealed, the female dwarf won the hand with three twos, and only Erasmus and the halfling had gone over the target seven.

"Tough break for your first hand." the halfling noted.

"Losing money's always a tough break." Erasmus replied.

"Trading off two was a bad call."

"Like I said," Erasmus' smile was becoming strained "I'm new to this game."

"Are you sure?" the halfling took a sip of his beer and motioned his chin to the centre of the table. "You laid down two Majad coppers."

"And?"

The halfling tugged on the sleeve of Erasmus' shirt, forcing the bard to begrudgingly lean down and listen to the halfling conspiratorially whisper to him. "Sevens is a Majad game! It's original name is Wealthy Merchant! Playing dumb isn't going to work in your favour right now, trust me."

Erasmus sat back up and looked at the halfling, whose face was a portrait of inebriated earnestness, save the barest hint of a knowing glimmer in his eyes.

Erasmus blinked twice. Surely his eyes were playing tricks on him; too much time at sea, he reasoned. The halfling was dressed like a pauper, and was very evidently drinking away whatever coin he wasn't losing at the game.

"I'm sure I'll get the hang of it after a few hands."

he smiled finally, turning to place his ante in the centre of the table.

The halfling only shrugged, tossing his own ante in as well. "Suit yourself." he said, reaching once more for his flagon and missing.

The game progressed for five more hands before Erasmus decided to start seriously playing. He allowed himself to win just enough to appear that he was beginning to grasp the basic rules of the game, still holding back any sign that he was well-versed in its nuances. Thankfully, the bets had remained relatively low up to that point, with nary more than a single silver piece being put down on any particular hands. He had just passed the deck to the half-orc to shuffle and deal when he heard a voice behind him that instantly sobered the well-needed buzz he was garnering from the whiskey he had been drinking.

"Gentlemen, ladies..." her voice cooed behind him. "Any chance you've room for one more?"

"Fine by me." the half-orc said as he placed the deck down on the table. "Was only going to play one more hand anyway. Take my seat before I leave without my breeches."

"Such a gentleman." Zarah said as she sat down in the half-orc's now vacated seat. "A pity, though. I may have been looking forward to seeing someone without their breeches tonight. The caramel-skinned elf looked up at the half-orc with a smile that seemed nearly to make his moustache curl. "I hope you aren't going far," she purred, "I may want to catch up later." She offered a dainty wave as he all but stumbled away from the table, due, Erasmus assumed, very little to the alcohol.

"So what's the game?" she asked, turning the deck over and quickly thumbing through the cards. "Oh, Wealthy Merchant!" she exclaimed "I haven't played this game in *ages!*"

Her act was impeccable. She hadn't so much as taken notice of Erasmus, as far as the rest of the table was concerned. Rather, as she began to shuffle the cards with practiced deftness, she began to ask around the table for

names. Incidentally, Erasmus discovered that the two human women were named Katrin and Shani, the dwarves were Orenlee and Fenrir, and the halfling called was O'doc.

"And you, handsome?" she asked innocuously, finally turning her attention to him.

Erasmus was seething beneath his calm facade. What in all the hells was Zarah doing on this side of the Windswept Sea? When had she arrived? Had she been following him? Did she get to his contact before he could?

Amid all these thoughts, he simply smiled back and said "Oh, no one special. Just a bard playing cards, looking for good company on a bad night."

She laughed, affecting the lilt of a smitten barmaid. "Such poetry!" She ran her cards along his arm playfully, sending shivers down it that were equal parts longing and revulsion. "Well bard, play those cards right, and I'm sure you'll have no want of that company tonight."

Erasmus didn't speak, *couldn't* speak. The two of them had done this dance dozens of times in every corner of the Four Kingdoms, save of course Hallowspire. She wanted something from him, and she knew exactly how to get it. At least, Erasmus resolved, she knew how to in the past. He was done with this dance, and he would prove it to her. By the end of the night, he would leave this table with a purse heavy from coin, perhaps with Katrin or Shani on his arm, and most importantly, with his dignity intact.

A tug at his sleeve from O'doc snapped him from his thoughts. "Um... bard?" he asked.

"It's Erasmus." the half-elf corrected the diminutive drunk.

"Oh! Alright, well you said..."

"I *just* said that my name is Erasmus." he interjected testily. "Now what is it?"

The halfling pointed to the centre of the table, and Erasmus saw the faces of those around it looking at him expectantly. "You have to put in your ante."

Erasmus looked to see all eyes at the table trained

on him. Fenrir coughed. Zarah smirked. Erasmus began silently, discreetly fuming.

"Apologies." he said to the whole table, smiling easily. At least, he hoped it was easily. "Got a little lost inside my head there for a moment." He reached down to his purse and pulled out two golden Majad suns, holding the two coins aloft in his thumb and forefinger. "What do you all say to making this game a little more interesting?" He punctuated his point by slapping the coins down on the table and sliding them into the centre pile.

"Careful there, handsome." Zarah practically purred in his ear, all the while remaining totally detached. "You don't want to go getting yourself into a situation you can't handle."

"Oh I'm quite confident that I know what I can and can't handle." he smiled through the torrent of conflicting emotions. "You just worry about dealing my cards, and I'll worry about playing them."

By the time the deck had come back around to Erasmus to deal, it was becoming patently obvious that, contrary to his desires, the bard actually *wasn't* able to handle such a high-stakes game of cards.

Somehow, whatever luck had been bestowed on Erasmus that first hand of the game had apparently been reserved solely for that. Hand after hand that followed seemed only to yield progressively worse cards. After managing to deal himself another abysmal hand consisting of three off-suit sixes, Erasmus conceded to stop losing money by bluffing on bad cards. When he discarded that hand for a deuce and two aces, he conceded to start folding on the bad cards altogether.

"Maybe cards aren't your game." Zarah offered cordially as Erasmus slid the deck over to her. "Maybe you should take up going to exotic dance halls. At least that way *you're* the one being entertained as you throw away your money."

The chorus of laughter around the table was more embarrassing than the worst heckler at the seediest public house that Erasmus had ever encountered. Hecklers

typically couldn't play an instrument, after all, whereas everyone at this table seemed to be playing Sevens far better than Erasmus could.

The only one not laughing was the halfling, O'doc. Instead, O'doc was gently, as gently as someone as drunk as he was able to, patting Erasmus on the arm in consolation. "Ah, he's not doin' that bad..." he slurred. "'S prob'ly just rusty. Been't sea too long." He looked up at Erasmus, the glaze over his eyes reflecting the candlelight. "How long'd you say y'were at sea for again?"

"I didn't." Erasmus answered, gently taking the halfling's hand off his arm and placing it on the table. "Let's just keep playing, shall we? I feel like my luck's about to turn."

After the hand had been played, Erasmus' two suns were quickly deposited into a grinning Orenlee's purse. The next two found their way to Zarah, and one more wound up in the hands of Fenrir.

"Alright." Erasmus finally said after discarding two fives and a three and seeing two more silver crescents vacate his personal coffers. "I think perhaps I might need a few hands' rest to better get a head for the game." He reached down to the case at his feet, opening the clasps and removing the dark-stained mandolin. "You wouldn't mind if I practiced a few scales while I did?"

He didn't wait for a response, feeling confident that the only one who might try to protest was Zarah, and that was highly unlikely. Instead, Erasmus lifted the small stringed instrument up to his chest, pulling out from the table a bit and leaning back, placing one leg up on the table. Using the palm of his right hand to mute the strings, he quietly plucked away a series of arpeggios in a major key, trusting that the bright, optimistic-sounding patterns of notes would ease the other players' moods, lulling them into a sense of calm that might affect their judgment with the cards. He kept an eye out for the telltale signs as he continued. The group became more talkative with one another, less guarded. He would continue this way for likely three or four more hands before exercising his

strange arcane ability. It would begin with his humming a few bars of this or that, to preempt the fact that he might "get lost in the music" and begin to sing. When he did, his words had the ability to catch people's attentions so completely that he could charm them, allowing Erasmus to command their actions for usually an hour or two, depending on how much he was able to "warm them up". Erasmus knew little of how arcana worked, and wouldn't have even assumed his ability *was* arcane had he not seen someone from the University in East Fellowdale perform a charm spell once when he was ten. What he did know was that he had never heard of music being used the way he used it, and the fact that he could helped him out of a number of sticky situations in his life, and allowed him to make some lucrative coin on more than one occasion in the process.

"Another suited seven!" he heard O'doc cry out gleefully as he began to move his fingers in preparation for a minor scale. "That's three in the last eight hands!" He looked up to see the halfling standing on top of his stool in order to reach across the table and gather his winnings. "I keep at this and the next round of drinks'll be on me!"

"Keep at this and I doubt I'll last more than another two hands." Zarah cooed pleadingly, a thin layer of contempt underpinning the statement. She was smart enough to recognize someone cheating at cards, but Erasmus could tell this was hardly high enough stakes to do anything more than walk away. So much the better if she did, he mused.

"Well you know," O'doc turned his attention to Zarah, still practically laying on the tabletop, "wealthy merchant is as much a game of luck as it is of skill." The halfling raised a finger as if to accentuate his point. "Especially the skill of being able to read people."

Erasmus noticed a glint out of the corner of his eye as the halfling continued to drunkenly wax poetic. The dwarf Fenrir held a small, slim dagger aloft, eyeing O'doc as he swayed to and fro, waiting for the right moment to strike. The bard looked briefly to Zarah, whose expression

betrayed nothing to O'doc, though she no doubt could clearly see the dwarf. Odds were that Fenrir had caught on to O'doc's cheating as well, and was opting for an easy way to break even, if not to make a profit. Zarah, Erasmus assumed, would watch the dwarf stab and rob the halfling, only to hunt him down later and do the same. Finally, Erasmus looked at O'doc, who continued his inebriated prattle about card games. Admittedly the halfling had proven to be little more than mildly annoying at best, and in truth there was no reason why someone sloppy enough to be caught cheating at cards *shouldn't* receive some sort of comeuppance, but if Erasmus was right in his assumption then O'doc was probably just an inexperienced child. Maybe he was slow, or maybe he was some rich merchant's son looking for a way to piss off his parents; maybe both, for all Erasmus knew. What the bard was certain of, though, was that no one at that table was without a sin or two to their name, and stabbing a kid over counting cards for a few silver coins was in supremely bad taste.

With little more than a self-reproaching sigh, Erasmus quickly moved his left hand as far up the fretboard of his mandolin as it could reach, pressed down his fingers at just the right points on the eight strings, and strummed as hard as he could.

The resultant noise that came from the instrument was a high-pitched, dissonant mess so offensive to the ears that everyone at the table, and most likely many others nearby, clasped their hands over their ears in dismay. Erasmus took the brief opportunity that the sour chord afforded him to stand up, kick his leg out and overtop of O'doc's stool, and plant his boot firmly into the distracted Fenrir's sternum.

The dwarf was taken off guard by the kick, stumbling back into Oranlee and knocking the both of them over, gasping for air as he landed atop her. Before he knew what he was doing, Erasmus found himself pulling O'doc off the table, shoving the halfling behind him for cover as the two dwarves stood up, and they, the human

women, and Zarah all had their eyes trained upon him.

“Well...” Erasmus said with a smirk that was probably doing a poor job of hiding the slow panic rising up within him. “Who’d like to take O’doc up on that round of drinks?”

Tavern brawls in Majadrin, or the closest approximation thereto, fascinated Erasmus during his first months in the kingdom. Typically, the misunderstanding that would start a brawl on the western side of the sea would in Majadrin result in a singular test of either wits or strength between the two disagreeing parties. A crowd would form around the spectacle, and whoever was bested would admit defeat, usually buying the winner a drink before being exiled from the premises. Bloodshed was uncommon in these Majad disagreements, and although Erasmus fancied himself one who preferred wits to strength he couldn’t help but feel a pang of nostalgia as he saw a stone mug hurled at the back of Fenrir’s head courtesy of a completely unknown patron. In less than a breath the bard found himself avoiding makeshift cudgels and missiles, throwing fists and elbows, and reveling in the drunken chaos that was a good old-fashioned Ghestal tavern brawl.

Erasmus found himself caught in a wrestling match with a stout, possibly dwarven woman, when he realized that in the heat of anarchic self-preservation he had lost track of the halfling. He relaxed the muscles in his arms, using the woman’s unexpected momentum to headbutt her with enough force to cause her to drop to the ground. The attack dizzied Erasmus some, but through the stars in his vision he was able to find his way behind a smallish square table that had been turned on its side.

He shook his head to gain his bearings, then peered over the top of the makeshift barricade to search for the halfling. No use starting a brawl to save a halfling that just gets himself killed anyway, he decided. He had expected it to be near impossible to spot O’doc amid the chaos of threescore bodies, most of whom were twice the halfling’s size. To his amazement, however, Erasmus was

able to spot the halfling easily. Not fifteen feet from where the half-elf knelt in relative safety, O'doc the halfling was fighting two half-orcs and a human, and winning.

If the halfling had been drunk during the game of sevens, then the sudden outbreak of mass violence had clearly served to sober him up with impeccable speed. He held the leg of a tall stool, brandishing it like a quarterstaff, nimbly avoiding his assailants' ham-sized fists, deftly rapping the two half-orcs across the knuckles, only to quickly shift his stance and drive the opposite end of the makeshift weapon into the stomach of the human, causing him to double over with a groan.

One of the half-orcs brought his two closed fists down in a swing that the halfling only just missed, bringing his stool-leg staff up to block, and having it split easily in two by the force of the missed blow. Without missing a beat, O'doc took a step back, allowing the half-orc's momentum to carry him down low enough that the halfling was able to swing the two pieces of the leg back in either direction, then change course suddenly, cuffing either side of the half-orc's head with the now *two* improvised weapons. Erasmus may have just been hearing things through the din, but he was almost certain that he heard the half-orc's jaw break on both sides. The second half-orc didn't fair much better, as two lightning-fast strikes from O'doc and the ensuing howl of pain most assuredly meant a broken kneecap. This mildly annoying halfling card cheat who either couldn't hold his liquor, or otherwise was very good at making it appear so, was fighting like he had years of military training, and Erasmus found he could do nothing but sit agog and watch the spectacle unfold. That was, of course, until he saw Zarah begin to encroach on the halfling.

The elf was taking little care to be discreet in her approach, and the complete obliviousness that O'doc showed seemed to warrant what Erasmus knew was recklessness on her part. There was no anger in her eyes, but Erasmus knew she aimed to finish what the dwarf had planned on starting.

Erasmus wasn't sure what caused him to jump out from his hiding place and charge his former partner. Maybe it was partially the frustration of feeling like he had finally gotten away from her, was finally going to move on with his life. Maybe it was that this strange halfling, for whatever reason, was showing Erasmus actual, earnest friendliness, and was about to get rewarded with almost assured death. Whatever the case, Erasmus had little time to ponder his motivations before he found himself tackling Zarah, using techniques she had taught him to pin her to the ground.

"What do you think you're doing?" He hissed at her, making note of the fact that she was making no effort to free herself.

"Taking back what's mine from a thief." she half-smiled back at him.

"A bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

"Not at all." she answered. "The people I've stolen from, we've stolen from, never learned it was us who did it. O'doc over there is sloppy and stupid, and deserves anything he gets."

"Gods, Zarah, look at him; he's just a kid!" Erasmus maintained the pressure on the hold.

"He's probably a conscript." Zarah countered calmly. "He fights like a soldier, probably swindled a few of his highborn meatheaded friends out of a day's rations over in Tillburg, thought he could do the same with *real* ruffians."

Erasmus twisted her limp arm upward, past the point where most people would wince in pain. "Leave. The Halfling. Alone." he gritted his teeth as he pointedly accentuated each word.

Her smile never faded, but her eyes betrayed something, a hint of pain? "I don't understand why you care so much." she said, her tone softening. The let loose a short, bitter laugh. "Hells, I don't know if I can remember the last time you rushed to *my* defense like that."

He didn't have time enough to ponder anything past just how deeply that last part cut into him, and before

either could say another word edgewise there was the loud boom of the Sailor and Seahag's main entrance being kicked in and the authoritative shouts of members of East Fellowdale's city guard.

"Everyone drop your weapons!"

"You're all under arrest as per Ghestal ordinance!"

"Somebody get that halfling off that dwarf!"

The moment's distraction was all Zarah needed, and before Erasmus knew what was happening she reversed the hold, lithely twisting around until the bard was now pinned to the floor, face down, and she sat with both knees digging into his lower back, pulling his arms back to the point where he did wince. "All those years, and the same old soft spot." she said, leaning down to whisper breathily in his ear as he struggled. "I've got to go, handsome, but I'll leave your new little boyfriend alone. You two have fun dealing with the local constabulary together."

He could feel her vault off his back, releasing his arm, though only to slam his head into the sticky floorboards of the tavern as she did. Once more Erasmus' vision was a dazzling replica of a clear night sky, and as soon as the real world began to come back into focus he felt himself being jerked to his feet, his hands bound behind his back.

"Alright you scruffy rabble rouser," the voice of the man hoisting him spoke "we're taking you and your little friend to the stocks, and then straight to the JP in the morning."

Erasmus quickly surveyed the scene around him. What little had been left intact at the Sailor and Seahag was presently buried under roughly fifty broken, bleeding, bruised bodies in varying states of unconsciousness, and enough ruined tables, chairs, and food and drinkware to run up repair and replacement costs somewhere in the vicinity of a few hundred Ghestal gold crowns. The handful of tavern patrons still standing were all in the custody of members of the city guard, all of whom wore mail shirts, green and gold tabards, and looks of pure

consternation. O'doc was among those with their hands bound, struggling fruitlessly as he tried to explain himself to the guardsman who held him. Zarah was nowhere to be found.

"You don't understand. I wasn't the one who started the whole thing. Near as I could tell, the dwarf I was playing cards with was the one who brandished a dagger in an establishment where weapons are strictly to be peacebound."

"That dwarf in question is lying unconscious on the floor because, according to that young lady over there," the guard motioned to Oranlee, also bound and held "you hit him with a stool."

"It was only the *leg* of a stool!" O'doc rebutted "And only in self-defense!"

"I can vouch for him." Erasmus spoke up. "He didn't throw the first punch. I suspect he didn't throw any of the first hundred or so." He swallowed hard, allowing the next sentence to creep out past layers and layers of better judgement. "I started the whole thing."

"Well that's good to know." another voice called out from toward the tavern's entrance. "Because I have a lot of questions that are going to need answers, and a lot of damage that's going to need repair."

The voice belonged to another halfling, dressed in a shirt, waistcoat, pantaloons, and shoes that looked like they alone could pay for the carnage that had been wrought. The deep-set lines in his ruddy face betrayed either his being slightly past middle-aged, or having twice the worries at half the age. Judging by the shock of bright red hair atop the halfling's head, Erasmus assumed the truth to be somewhere in the middle. He all but stormed down the steps into the taproom with all the pomp and fury of a man who'd just had his house torn down without warning, right to to guard holding Erasmus. "Now, Captain Umar," he said, not bothering to look up at the guard, but rather closing his eyes and pressing a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose "could you *please* explain how this happened."

“Well, Mr. Raftmite, sir,” the captain began “from what we have deduced, that one over there,” he pointed at O’doc “had someone try to put a dagger in his back for cheating at cards, but before he could this one here” he pointed now to Erasmus “threw a punch, and the whole bar erupted, sir.”

Mr. Raftmite looked over to O’doc, then back up to Erasmus. “Let me have a better look at this one.” he said, prompting the captain to put a mail-clad knee behind one of Erasmus’ own, causing the bard to drop and meet the red-haired halfling eye-to-eye. Raftmite looked at Erasmus a minute, then lifted a hand brushing aside a few strands of the bard’s hair to reveal the slight tip of one of his ears. The halfling nodded, apparently satisfied, and looked back up to the captain. “Allow me to rephrase my question, Captain Umar.” he said. “How did *you and your men* allow this to happen to *my establishment*?” There was an edge to the words Raftmite emphasized.

The captain stammered as he answered now, suddenly nervous. “Well, um, big city you see, Mr. Raftmite. Plenty of taverns with brawls to break up, especially what with the storm tonight and all. Guard can’t be everywhere at once, you know.”

“No, you most certainly cannot.” Raftmite replied, his mouth forming a paper-thin line. “So allow me to ask you, Captain, knowing that you cannot be everywhere at once, and knowing that the rain brings more people into taverns, resulting in a higher chance of brawls...” Umar moved to speak, but Raftmite cut him off. “Knowing both these things, you and your men opted to make sure *other* establishments were safe, whilst mine looks as though it was torn apart by a family of wild bears.” The halfling remained calm, putting Erasmus all the more on-edge. “All this being said, Captain, I must ask:” Raftmite abruptly picked up the remains of a broken chair and flung it at another of the guards without warning, his face turning crimson as he whirled back to face the captain “WHAT IN ALL THE HELLS AM I PAYING YOU ASSES FOR?!”

He picked up another remnant of a piece of

furniture and swung it up between the captain's legs, causing the man to release his hold on Erasmus. Raftmite reached up and yanked Umar's tabard, pulling the captain down to face him. "Now you listen well, you useless, tarted-up guard dog," he all but spat "neither you nor your men will receive a single copper from me until my tavern has been restored to its prior state, but I expect your service nonetheless."

"Of...of course, Mr. Raftmite." the captain nodded and groaned.

"And if I find out that you've been lining your coffers with one of my competitor's coin," Raftmite pulled him in close "I will *personally* see to it that King Meklan has your head for accepting bribes." Raftmite released the captain with all the care of someone dropping a dead rat, and turned around. "Now get all these jackasses out of my tavern so I can start cleaning up this disaster!" The captain rose, and was about to hoist Erasmus back onto his feet when Raftmite spoke again. "Leave the instigator!" he said, pointing at Erasmus without turning around, then pointing to O'doc "And his halfling friend. I'll deal with them *personally*."

Erasmus looked to O'doc, who looked back at him in sheer panic. The guards moved double-time, evidently spooked by their irate benefactor, and quickly cleared the taproom of everyone present, conscious or not, until only Erasmus, O'doc, and Mr. Raftmite remained.

"Stay right there." Raftmite said menacingly as he walked through the debris to where the dagger that had been meant for O'doc sat. He picked it up, and made his way over to the other halfling, who was practically quivering.

"I swear I didn't mean for any of this to happen." O'doc pleaded. "I'm just a lousy card cheat who picked the wrong table. I'll make it up to you, I swear!"

With a flick of his wrist, Raftmite sliced through O'doc's bonds, before walking over and doing the same to Erasmus'. The half-elf let out an audible sigh of relief, and he could see that O'doc was fighting to keep from

collapsing in it.

“Follow me.” Raftmite said to them both, walking toward the bar. “Have a seat; we need to talk.” The pair managed to find two unbroken barstools to sit on, while Raftmite walked behind the bar. “Thank all the damned gods no one got behind here.” He pulled out a crystal bottle filled with a golden liquid and three tumblers, pouring a measure into each, then thoughtfully pouring a second measure into one. He slid Erasmus and O’doc the singles. “Erasmus Stonehand, I presume?” Before Erasmus could ask how Raftmite knew, he answered. “Your mandolin there was my first hint.” He pointed down the bar to where Caster sat, unharmed, and it was now Erasmus’ turn to nearly collapse. “The second was your ears.” Raftmite continued. “My Majad contact said you were a half-elf.” Erasmus looked back to Raftmite, and suddenly the shock of red hair became all the more prominent. “Call me Orne.” he said, holding his hand out for Erasmus to shake. Orne turned to O’doc. “And you, no doubt, are O’doc Overhill.” He shook O’doc’s hand as well. “Your mother quite favoured this place when she was still a student at the Arcane University. You look just like her.”

“Overhill, eh?” Erasmus cocked an eyebrow at O’doc as the name rang a bell in his mind. “That explains quite a bit.”

“How’s that?” O’doc said, taking a sip from his tumbler and making the sour face of someone who doesn’t appreciate a fine whiskey.

“It only stands to reason that someone related to Odo of Khalen Ridge would know how to take on an entire room of combatants with a piece of furniture.” he replied, sipping the whiskey himself and allowing its rich, smooth burn to warm the back of his throat.

O’doc looked as though he meant to say something, but was cut off by Orne. “Alright, pleasantries over, now down to business. Stonehand, word is you came my way looking for work.” Erasmus nodded. “Excellent.” he pointed to O’doc. “I have a job, and he’ll be your partner.”

Both Erasmus and O'doc began to speak up in protest. As far as he could tell, O'doc simply wasn't interested, but Erasmus had more than his fill of working with a partner in Majadrin, and wasn't afraid to let Orne know.

"A pity, that," Orne said, draining his own whiskey in one swallow "seeing as neither of you has much choice in the matter."

"What?!" half-elf and halfling said in unison.

Orne motioned behind them with his chin to the pile of scrap wood that used to be the Sailor and Seahag's taproom. "All that back there? I am holding the pair of you *personally* accountable."

"But I never started a brawl!" O'doc began "And Erasmus was only trying to help me *not die!*"

"And I thought that those guards you have in your pocket were paying for it out of their 'salaries.'" Erasmus emphasized the last word.

"Look, when push comes to shove, that brawl started because *you* kicked someone in the throat trying to help *you*." Orne spoke matter-of-factly, pointing at Erasmus and O'doc respectively. "And the weeks of unpaid labour that would equal the cost of these damages means that those guards would likely get to the point where they stopped doing the job I'm not presently paying them for." He poured himself another measure of whiskey and coughed it back almost instantly. "Ergo, I hire you two for jobs that will help me acquire the funds to get this place repaired, Captain Umar and his men go back to getting paid for their work, and we all go home happy."

Erasmus looked over at O'doc. He was by no means a religious individual, but in that moment, an entire night spent trying to watch the back of a mildly annoying terrible card cheat who couldn't hold his liquor seemed to have actually been some sort of divine intervention, though only time would tell from which god.

With a heavy, burdened sigh, Erasmus looked back to Orne. "Alright, what's this job?" Orne Raftmite smiled a dignified smirk that

Erasmus now knew had all the propriety of an unwashed hog at a noble banquet. "Well, gentlemen, how do you feel about attending an auction in Tillburg?"